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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 23 March 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Inflation

1. **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): What recent steps the Government have taken to tackle the impact of (a) inflation and (b) increases in the cost of living on households and businesses in Wales. [906143]

10. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What recent steps the Government have taken to tackle the impact of (a) inflation and (b) increases in the cost of living on households and businesses in Wales. [906154]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): Among a range of measures, the Chancellor recently announced a £200 energy bill discount for households across the whole of the UK, including Wales, as well as £180 million to the Welsh Government in recognition of the council tax energy rebate in England.

Richard Thomson: About 1.5 million households across the UK depend on heating oil for their domestic energy needs. Last September, households could have expected to pay about £250 for a 500-litre delivery. Last week, those prices had risen to anywhere between £600 and £900 for a delivery of the same volume. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with his Cabinet colleagues, particularly the Chancellor of the Exchequer, about how that burden could be mitigated for households at the mercy of that unregulated section of the energy market?

Simon Hart: I am glad the hon. Gentleman has raised this question. I am in that particular bracket myself, so I know exactly what he is talking about. There have been some interventions already. As far as conversations with the Chancellor and his team are concerned, they have been numerous up to and including this morning, but I think the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I ask him if he can possibly wait till roughly 12.30 this afternoon, when the Chancellor will spell out exactly what his own proposals are.

Chris Stephens: With rising inflation and a cost of living crisis, a recent YouGov survey of Welsh voters found that 71% felt that their personal financial situation is set to worsen over the next 12 months and 27% said that they will struggle to pay their next energy bill. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Chancellor should turn his energy loan into a grant and reverse the £20 universal credit cut?

Simon Hart: Again, I can only say that it would be unhelpful and inappropriate for me to predict and prejudge what the Chancellor will be saying in the Chamber in a matter of minutes. All I can say is that these are conversations—[HON. MEMBERS: “Go on!”] I would like to, but I am not going to. These conversations have been a regular part of—have dominated—the Wales Office’s connection with the Treasury in the last few days and weeks. As I say, the hon. Member has not got long to wait, and I hope he can bear with me.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The boss of oil giant BP said last month that it had more money than it knows what to do with, which is completely the opposite situation to that of households right across Wales that cannot cope with record inflation and astronomical energy bills on the watch of the right hon. Gentleman’s Government, so why will he and the Chancellor not agree to a one-off windfall tax on oil and gas producers?

Simon Hart: There are two points I would like to make. The first one I have already made, which is not to prejudge what the Chancellor is going to say in his statement in a few minutes’ time, which will address this and I hope numerous other issues that are occupying the minds of Members across the House, in fact. As far as the second point is concerned, I am afraid a slightly well-trodden path of the Opposition is to confront every possible problem by finding somebody and taxing them. We do not believe that is necessarily the answer, because we want energy companies to be part of the solution and also to be part of future and ongoing investment in energy infrastructure, and they will not do that—and will not be able to do that—if all the Government’s responses are simply, as I say, to identify them and tax them. It may be a populist gesture, but it is not actually going to solve the problem that we both wish to try to resolve.

Jo Stevens: I am afraid the Secretary of State is completely out of touch with public opinion on this. Polling this week, published by 38 Degrees, shows that 69% of the Welsh public say that the Government’s energy bill loan package is not enough to help those struggling with their energy bills, and 67% support Labour’s windfall tax because it would mean £200 off energy bills now and £600 off energy bills for the hardest-hit households in Wales. This would be a tax on the unexpected profits of oil and gas companies, so why is he on the side of those oil and gas companies, not on the side of the Welsh public?

Simon Hart: I think that just defaulting to a 38 Degrees petition as if that is some kind of solution to a very complex and long-standing problem is a cheap and populist way out of this. We are taking a more responsible view, as I hope the hon. Lady will hear from the

Chancellor later. There have already been numerous interventions—for example, we have provided an additional £180 million to the Welsh Government in this particular context—so I urge the hon. Member not just to press the petition button and think that that is all the Opposition have to do. We have to do a lot more than that if we are serious about addressing the long-term challenges that face us all. None of us is without this: we all have constituents with these problems and we all know exactly the challenges she refers to.

Freeports

2. **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on establishing a freeport in Wales. [906144]

12. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on establishing a freeport in Wales. [906156]

13. **Jacob Young** (Redcar) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on establishing a freeport in Wales. [906157]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): We have had constructive discussions with the Welsh Government on the importance of establishing our freeports programme, and we continue to work closely on that as a matter of urgency.

Mark Fletcher: The east midlands freeport will see nearly £9 billion of new investment, and tens of thousands of new jobs created in our region. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the Welsh Government really cared about the people of Ynys Môn, they would support the efforts of our colleagues to deliver a freeport, and bring more jobs and investment to the island?

Simon Hart: If nothing else, I think the Wales Office Parliamentary Private Secretary—my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie)—has won a bet in getting her constituency up in lights again on the question of freeports. My hon. Friend makes an interesting point about something we have been campaigning on for some time, and this fantastic scheme will create long-lasting sustainable jobs across the whole UK. I hope he will forgive me, however, for not trying to prejudge what that process may conclude regarding the actual venues. We are expecting a number of very enthusiastic bids into the scheme once it is launched. I think we can describe that announcement as “imminent”, so my hon. Friend, and the residents of Ynys Môn, do not have long to wait.

Alexander Stafford: The flow of goods through free trade is a critical priority for prosperity, whether in the village of Wales in Rother Valley, or in the great nation of Wales. What role does my right hon. Friend see for freeports in that, and how might a freeport in north Wales—for example in Anglesey—help to improve the problems associated with a central corridor and the working of the Northern Ireland protocol?

Mr Speaker: He means Holy Island.

Simon Hart: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The concept of freeports is indisputably positive, and others who have gone down that route with the launch of English freeports are already able to report inward investment, and good

sustainable jobs that will contribute to our economic recovery as well as our net-zero ambitions. As I said, in Wales there will be a number of very high-quality bids. We have committed in the manifesto to at least one freeport in Wales, and hopefully we may be able to expand on that over time. The long wait for a decision, and the many months of wrestling with the Welsh Government to reach a conclusion that we can all live with, are nearly at an end.

Jacob Young: A freeport in Wales, especially in Anglesey, sounds like a great idea, just like in Teesside, where the UK’s largest and first post-Brexit freeport has already led to the announcement of thousands of future jobs in new green technologies. Does the Minister agree it is vital that we all get behind our freeport policy, which will help to level up and deliver the change we need in our areas?

Simon Hart: My hon. Friend makes a good point, which gives me the opportunity to highlight that freeports are already a resounding success in his area. We do not need to go any further than that, because the work that he and the Mayor, Ben Houchen, have done in that area is fantastic. Anyone who had any doubts about what freeports can bring to a region need only look at my hon. Friend’s area to see that they make a serious and positive contribution to future economic prosperity.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The Secretary of State extols the virtues of a freeport in Wales, but will he assure the House that he will not allow DP World, which is responsible for the shameful sacking of 800 P&O workers, anywhere near the construction or operation of any freeport in the United Kingdom?

Simon Hart: The hon. Lady raises a timely point, and I hope that the comments made by the Transport Secretary, and others, will reassure her that we are deeply disturbed by the way that action was taken. As she knows, it has been referred to the Insolvency Service, and if there are demonstrable transgressions in that process, that could lead to criminal prosecutions. I can give the hon. Lady the assurance she needs as far as freeports in Wales are concerned.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): In the ongoing work and discussions on freeports with the Welsh Government, does the Secretary of State agree with the Welsh Government’s three basic and rather easy requests: parity over decision making; fair funding between freeports across the nation so that Welsh Government funds do not have to be diverted away from vital projects in Wales; and that the ethical standards of the Welsh an assurance Government—which are certainly higher than those of the UK Government—will be met if any freeport is delivered in Wales?

Simon Hart: I hope I can reassure the hon. Gentleman. The fact that we are, I hope, imminently to make an announcement that involves the UK and the Welsh Governments, means that both parties in this long-running negotiation are satisfied. As I said, I do not want to prejudge the announcement or what the bidding process may conclude, but we can absolutely agree that there are a number of important issues. We have taken more than two years to reach this point, and I hope the Welsh Government, and everybody else involved in the process, will be satisfied by the outcome.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Secretary of State has said that freeports in Wales will create 15,000 jobs, but where is his evidence that any of the economic benefits that flow from that will reach ordinary Welsh workers rather than the usual fat cats, such as DP World?

Simon Hart: The answer to that question, if the hon. Gentleman does not want to believe me, comes from port authorities, local authorities, stakeholders and others around Wales. People, including in his constituency, are looking at the evidence for freeports and the kind of upsides that my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) mentioned for Teesside a few moments ago. It might be a step too far for the hon. Gentleman to believe me, but he should believe his constituents and his community who believe this to be long overdue and are very anxious that we conclude it as soon as possible.

Hywel Williams: From welcoming Ukrainian refugees to safeguarding seafarers' rights, the Government consistently disappoint. The Welsh Conservatives have now joined Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru to call for an expedited visa process to ensure simple, fast, safe and legal routes to sanctuary in the UK and to remove the requirement for Ukrainians to provide biometric evidence prior to leaving Ukraine. The Secretary of State is Wales's man in the Cabinet: what is he doing to ensure that those jointly agreed Welsh humanitarian aims are achieved?

Simon Hart: I hope I can reassure the hon. Gentleman. Numerous conversations have been ongoing between the UK Government and the Welsh Government about the Ukraine refugee position. I stress that this is not a competition. We are working together to try to get the best outcome in a severe humanitarian crisis, and that means that we are putting our political differences to one side, and I hope that he can join us in that endeavour. We are incredibly grateful to local authorities, charities, the public in Wales and, of course, the Welsh Government for making this happen at the pace that it has. I spoke to the Ukrainian ambassador only last week, and he is also incredibly grateful for the way in which Wales, in all its different forms, has stepped up to the mark to try to resolve the problem. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support in our attempt to achieve those ambitions.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Most of the focus on the freeport opportunity has understandably been on maritime ports. Can I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the merits of Barry port? In addition, can I ask him to pay particular attention to Cardiff airport, which is closely associated with Barry port, and assure me that it will be central to his thinking?

Simon Hart: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising that. He is right to point out that freeports are not necessarily confined to coastal areas: some of the best examples of freeports in the UK are inland freeports. They are also not all identical, and there is not a one-size-fits-all solution for the whole of the UK. We are trying to be as flexible as we can in looking at all the different dynamics, including Cardiff airport, to make sure that when the bids come in we are not too prescriptive and we look at all the issues with the most open mind that we can.

Police Funding

3. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the impact of the level of police funding for Wales on crime. [906145]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): Office for National Statistics data for the year ending September 2021 show that crime levels per capita in Wales are below the national average across England and Wales. As for funding, this Conservative Government will always be the party of law and order, and that is why I am pleased to be able to say that we are putting £820 million into policing next year, an increase of £40 million.

Liz Twist: In the nearly 13 years the Government have been in power, police staffing has fallen by 25,000. Across the UK, there are 7,000 fewer police community support officers on the streets than there were in 2010. In Wales, the Welsh Labour Government, who do not have jurisdiction over policing, have stepped in and funded 500 PCSOs and will fund a further 100. Does that not show that the Tories are happy to see rising crime and an increase in victims, and it is only Labour which is taking action to keep our communities safe?

David T. C. Davies: What it shows is that the Welsh Government will have had a record increase in spend of around £2.5 billion over the next couple of financial years. What I can also tell the hon. Lady is that 603 additional police officers are being allocated for Wales, 479 have taken that opportunity and there are still 100 vacancies. As somebody who spent nine years as a special constable, I recommend to anyone who wants to serve their community that they should consider joining a police force in Wales.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): English police forces are fully reimbursed by the Government for the cost of training police officers. In Wales, the Home Office has reimbursed only half the cost, leaving Welsh police forces with a shortfall of over £2 million. Will the Minister and the Secretary of State persuade their Cabinet colleagues to meet the historical funding shortfall in full, so that Welsh police forces are no longer penalised and are in future treated equally with English ones?

David T. C. Davies: This is actually a quite complex problem, and far more complex perhaps than we have time for in this forum. The real problem is that the Welsh Government are failing to discuss with the Home Office how the apprenticeship scheme works. I urge the hon. Gentleman to talk to his colleagues in the Welsh Labour Government, get them to recognise the apprenticeships schemes and ensure that police officers are properly trained and police forces fully refunded.

Cross-Border Transport

4. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Welsh Government on cross-border transport connectivity with north Wales. [906146]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): As the hon. Gentleman knows, I discuss regularly with Cabinet members and members of the Welsh Government a range of transport matters. It was a pleasure to meet the hon. Gentleman last week to discuss cross-border connectivity in north Wales. The Union connectivity review recognised the importance of the north Wales transport corridor and the Government are carefully considering the recommendations before reporting back.

Christian Matheson: I thank the Minister for meeting me last week. He will understand that if north Wales is to get the full benefits of HS2, the line from Crewe to Chester and on to north Wales will need to be upgraded, including work at Chester station. Will he get on to his Transport Department colleagues and get them to get a move on with making a decision on that upgrade work?

David T. C. Davies: Yes. I thought the hon. Gentleman made a very powerful case last week about the importance of improvements in Chester. I think he would agree that improvements to the rail service in some parts of England will benefit passengers in Wales and vice versa. I fully agree with him about HS2. It will have an enormous impact and deliver improvements not just for passengers in England, but for passengers in Wales and especially north Wales.

Aberconwy

5. **Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con):** What recent steps he has taken with Cabinet colleagues to help support people living in Aberconwy constituency.
[906147]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): Levelling up is all about places like Aberconwy. From our investment in a new tourism and innovation hub in Llandudno to improving digital connectivity for over 60 public buildings across Aberconwy, we will give everyone in Wales the opportunity to flourish and ensure that no place is left behind.

Robin Millar: I thank the Minister on behalf of residents for his answer and for the UK Government's interest. The UK Government have funded a book for every schoolchild in the UK to commemorate the platinum jubilee. A bilingual version has been printed for schoolchildren in Wales. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that schoolchildren in Wales and Aberconwy—and even in Ynys Môn—will receive a copy of that book?

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend is correct. The UK Government wanted to celebrate the enormous achievement and the enormous commitment to public service that has been made by our monarch, and have produced the book bilingually to ensure that schoolchildren across Wales are able to read bilingually about the contribution made by Her Majesty the Queen. I am sure they all look forward eagerly to receiving their copy. The UK Government are working with the Welsh Government to ensure that that can happen imminently.

Roads Review

6. **Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con):** What discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the impact of their roads review on transport infrastructure.
[906148]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): The Wales Office has regular discussions with the Welsh Government on cross-border connectivity. I am afraid that Labour's plans are more of a roadblock than a road review. I urge the Welsh Government to focus more on investment and on delivering their 2016 manifesto commitments to sort out the M4 relief road and various other vital links.

Dr Davies: Five years ago, the A55-A494 network resilience study, commissioned by the Welsh Government, recognised the strategic importance of the route and the fact that it is often above capacity and vulnerable to disruption. How does my right hon. Friend believe the roads review may impact on plans for UKNET, a high-performing strategic transport network for the whole of the United Kingdom?

Simon Hart: I know both the roads that my hon. Friend refers to—I travel on them regularly—and I am well aware of their importance to his constituency and the region's economic future. The UK Government's contribution to the road infrastructure is second to none. Some liaison is clearly necessary with the Welsh Government about certain aspects of that. We hope that they will publish their strategy soon and look again at their road strategy, because a simple moratorium on road improvements and new roads is not the way to restore economic prosperity in his area or anywhere else.

Steel Industry

7. **Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to support the steel industry in Wales.
[906150]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): The UK Government recognise the importance of the steel industry in Wales and the UK. The £30 million loan secured for Celsa is a demonstration of our commitment to the steel sector. Our response during the pandemic helped to secure more than 1,000 steel jobs in Wales.

Jessica Morden: While he was campaigning for Brexit in 2016, the Prime Minister told steelworkers in Wales that it was:

“Mad that we can't cut steel energy costs because of EU rules”.

Now that we have left the EU, is it not madder that the Government have still done little to cut sky-high energy bills, which are a massive burden on our steel producers in Wales?

Simon Hart: I thank the hon. Lady, who has been an unbelievably effective campaigner for the steel industry in her area and in Wales more widely. The Business Secretary and I met the steel sector the other day at the Steel Council. The issue she has raised was an important part of that and the Business Secretary was able to offer some reassurance. I do not want to prejudge today's statement from the Chancellor, but as we have the opportunity, I hope that the hon. Lady will join me in thanking the International Trade Secretary for her overnight success in lifting steel tariffs between the US and the UK. That will make a significant difference to everybody involved in the steel industry in the UK.

Ukraine

9. **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support people in Wales in assisting friends and family in Ukraine. [906153]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): There have already been more than 10,000 Welsh registrations of interest in the UK Government's Homes for Ukraine scheme. Wales is opening its arms to the people of Ukraine, proving that we are all now super-sponsors.

Simon Baynes: I am glad to have been able to help some families leaving Ukraine and I congratulate the many people and communities in Clwyd South who have been fundraising and giving practical help in the Ukraine crisis. Will the Secretary of State give further details on the Homes for Ukraine scheme, with the 10,000 registrations from Clwyd South and across Wales, and on how that is helping the situation at present?

Simon Hart: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way in which he has been campaigning on this issue; it is a great example of what Members across the House have been able to do. I repeat my earlier answer about meeting the Ukrainian ambassador last week and expressing his gratitude, as well as mine, to local authorities, charities, the public in Wales and, in particular, the Welsh Government. This has been a joint effort—a superb all-round effort, involving all the stakeholders I have mentioned and more. As I stressed earlier, this is not a competition, but a collaborative effort, in which the early uptake has been superb. I think that we will be able to offer help to the necessary number of people on the timescale that we need because of that level of co-operation. [*Interruption.*]

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I hope that the House will want to listen to this question. Liana, my constituent, is from Ukraine and is in Cardiff on a global talent visa. Liana's mother-in-law is depending on the kindness of strangers in Dublin for her accommodation, but the Home Office is not letting her in from Dublin even though there is a home waiting for her in Cardiff. I notice that the Home Secretary has joined Members on the Front Bench. Will the right hon. Gentleman have a word with the Home Secretary and ask her to look into why someone who is here on a global talent visa for science cannot bring their mother-in-law to stay with them in Cardiff?

Simon Hart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I suspect that many Members have similar examples of people who, sadly, have slipped through the net or are in a difficult position. I absolutely give him an assurance, as I know the Home Secretary will, that we will look at each and every one of those individual cases and, hopefully, we will deliver to him the answer that he needs.

Offshore Wind

11. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help develop floating offshore wind projects in Wales. [906155]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The UK Government are committed to supporting the development of the floating offshore

wind industry in Wales, with £160 million of funding available for floating offshore wind ports and factories across the UK. That funding will ensure that Wales capitalises on the huge opportunities that floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea presents.

Selaine Saxby: As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Celtic sea, may I ask my hon. Friend to detail what steps are being taken to progress floating offshore wind so that the supply-chain benefits are felt all the way around the Celtic sea's shores, from Pembrokeshire across to North Devon and Cornwall?

David T. C. Davies: I commend my hon. Friend's commitment to championing this opportunity through her role as chair of the Celtic sea APPG. Under this Conservative Government, with this Prime Minister, we will continue to see huge increases in the renewable energy that we produce and supply-chain benefits that will be felt across the UK.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I hugely welcome offshore wind on the basis that it is not onshore. Will my hon. Friend meet me to ensure that we put more of this wonderful renewable energy offshore and stop industrialising the landscape of Montgomeryshire?

David T. C. Davies: It is always a pleasure to meet my hon. Friend. I assure him that this Conservative Government will continue to support floating offshore wind in a way that will have the support of the public.

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

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [906240] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 23 March.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Helen Hayes: The degrading strip-search of Child Q two years ago, in a school that should have been a safe place, at the hands of police officers she should have been able to trust, has caused anger and distress across the country. On Monday, the Minister for Crime and Policing failed to answer four separate questions in this Chamber about when he first knew about Child Q and what urgent action he took in response, so I ask the Prime Minister: when did he first hear about the strip-search of Child Q in her school? Does he believe that the characteristic dither and delay of his Government in responding to this appalling case is remotely acceptable when it comes to the safety of children?

The Prime Minister: I think that that is a completely ridiculous characterisation of the response of the Government, because of course the reports of the incident are deeply distressing and deeply concerning—everybody

shares the hon. Lady's feelings about that—but the Metropolitan police have rightly apologised and the Independent Office for Police Conduct is investigating. For that reason, it would not be right to comment further.

Q2. [906241] Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): People across North East Hertfordshire are coming together to provide support and refuge to families fleeing the invasion in Ukraine. The Baldock and District action committee is about to welcome four families to our community. Does the Prime Minister agree that that shows the open-hearted generosity of the British people? Will he continue to do all he can with the Minister for Refugees to make the process as simple and speedy as possible?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend and all those involved in the two big schemes that we have now for welcoming people from Ukraine. The Homes for Ukraine scheme is now open; I think that about 40,000 have already applied and 150,000 families across the country have said that they want to welcome Ukrainians. That is a fantastic thing, and I thank Baldock and District for helping to lead the way.

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

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Eight hundred loyal British workers fired over Zoom, instantly replaced by foreign agency workers shipped in on less than the minimum wage—if the Prime Minister cannot stop that, what is the point of his Government?

The Prime Minister: We condemn the callous behaviour of P&O. I think it is no way to treat hard-working employees, and I can tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman that we will not sit by. It looks to me as though, under section 194 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992, the company concerned has broken the law, and we will therefore be taking action, and encouraging workers themselves to take action under the Employment Rights Act 1996—and both those Acts were passed by Conservative Governments. If the company is found guilty, it will face fines running into millions of pounds. In addition, we will be taking steps to protect all mariners who are working in UK waters and ensure that they are paid the living wage.

Keir Starmer: When Owen Paterson was on the ropes, the Prime Minister was prepared to rip up the entire rulebook to save his jobs. P&O workers want him to show the same fight in relation to them. The Government had advance warning of these mass sackings—a memo was sent to the Transport Secretary and to the Prime Minister's office—but they did not lift a finger to stop them. Did the Prime Minister not understand the memo, or did he just not bother to read it?

The Prime Minister: I think what the right hon. and learned Gentleman needs to rip up are his pre-scripted questions, because I just answered that question. The point at issue is whether or not the Government were properly notified. It is not about what happened previously. I knew about it on the Thursday when it became public, but the company concerned has a duty to notify the

Government 45 days before taking action of that kind, which is why we are taking the action that we are taking to protect hard-working people. What we are also doing this month, by the way, is lifting the living wage for all workers across our country by a further £1,000, so it is up by £5,000 since 2015.

Keir Starmer: I think the Prime Minister just said that he knew about it on the day. I take it from that answer that the Prime Minister did not read his WhatsApp briefing. Let us test his rhetoric. Since he came to office, P&O has received more than £38 million-worth of Government contracts, and the parent company, DP World, is lined up for £50 million of taxpayers' money under the freeport scheme. The Government are apparently reviewing these contracts, but reviews do not save jobs. Can the Prime Minister guarantee that those companies will not get a penny more of taxpayers' money, or a single tax break, until they reinstate the workforce?

The Prime Minister: I think what the House has already heard is that we are taking legal action—

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): You are not.

The Prime Minister: Yes, we are—against the company concerned, under the 1992 and 1996 Acts. That is the right thing to do, because it seems to me that that the company has broken the law. But if the right hon. and learned Gentleman is asking this Government to do what Labour usually wants us to do and actively pitchfork away investment around the country from overseas, that is not what we will do. We will take 'em to court, we will defend the rights of British workers, but what we will not do is launch a wholehearted campaign against overseas investment, as Labour would want, because that is completely wrong—and wrong for those workers.

Keir Starmer: Those at DP World must be quaking in their boots. The Prime Minister says how disappointed he is in them, while handing them £50 million.

The Prime Minister has referred to the law. Speaking of hollow reviews, as the law stands it is not illegal to pay seafarers less than the national minimum wage, even if they are working out of UK ports and in UK waters. Two years ago, the Prime Minister's Government admitted that that was unjustifiable, and promised, two years ago—you've guessed it—to review it. Two years on, despite what the Prime Minister says today, nothing has been done, which has left the gate wide open for P&O. British workers do not need another empty review; they need action, so when will the Prime Minister fix that gap in the law?

The Prime Minister: With great humility, I must ask the right hon. and learned Gentleman to listen to the answer that I gave to his first question. That would help him to scrap his third or fourth question and try another one. We are going to address the defects in the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, and ensure that everyone working in the UK exclusive economic zone is paid the living wage as people are in the rest of the country.

Keir Starmer: The problem is, that is what the Prime Minister said two years ago. It did not happen, and P&O took advantage of the gap left wide open by this Prime Minister. P&O's behaviour comes off the back of

a string of fire and rehire cases, with profitable companies threatening to fire workers unless they accept a pay cut. The Prime Minister keeps telling us just how opposed he is to fire and rehire, but as we saw on Monday, he does not have the backbone to ban it. While he sits on his hands, more and more workers are having their lives turned upside down by this appalling practice. What good to them is a Prime Minister who is all mouth and no trousers?

The Prime Minister: The most notable practitioner of fire and rehire is, of course, the Labour party itself. The right hon. and learned Gentleman may be interested to know that we will be vindicating the rights of British workers—UK employees—under UK law, but I can tell him that the law that P&O itself is allegedly relying on was introduced as a result of EU directives. Never forget—[*Interruption.*] He may not like it, but that is the reality. He would have kept us unable to change it and unable to get out of it. He would have made it impossible for us to protect UK employees in the way that we are going to do. What we are doing above all is ensuring that workers in this country have the best protection of all, which is a job. Under this Government, thanks to the steps we have taken and thanks to the stewardship of the economy by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, which you will be hearing about a little more, Mr Speaker, we have 600,000 more people in payrolled employment than before the pandemic began.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister can complain all he likes, but on Monday he ordered all of his lot to abstain on a vote to ban fire and rehire. And they all did! Then, to add insult to injury, after the vote his party posted a message saying that, where possible, they will look to find P&O workers new jobs. Pathetic! They do not want new jobs; they want their old jobs back. They do not want a Prime Minister hoisting the white flag; they want him to fight for their livelihoods. There are 82,000 seafarers in this country. I have spoken to dockers, engineers, deckhands and sailors, and they are all worried about what this means for them. This morning, one of them said to me: “If P&O can get away with this, other companies will get rid of us too and replace us with cheap labour from abroad.” Why does the Prime Minister think that they will take a crumb of comfort from his half-arsed bluster and waffle today?

The Prime Minister: P&O is plainly not going to get away with it any more than any other company that treats its employees in that scandalous way. This is a historic moment for this country, actually, because it is now two years to the day since we went into lockdown. That plunged this country into the biggest, deepest loss of output than we have seen in our lifetimes. Thanks to the Chancellor, who protected the economy, jobs and companies, we have now been able to come out faster and more effectively than any other comparable economy. We have unemployment back down to 3.9%, we have 600,000 more people on the payroll and the best assurance we can give workers around the country is that the economy is now bigger than it was before the pandemic began. We will continue to get the big calls right, as we got the big calls right during the pandemic. Labour got the big calls wrong. They would do absolutely nothing to protect workers, let alone P&O workers, because not only would they have kept us in lockdown, but they

would have kept those ships in port, unable to move. That is the reality. There has never been a Labour Government that left office with unemployment lower than when they began. That is the reality and that is their record on jobs.

Q3. [906242] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I strongly support the Government's intention to make England smoke-free by 2030, but on the current trajectory we are going to miss that target. It is vital that we discourage young people from starting to smoke and encourage people who already smoke to give up. So does my right hon. Friend agree that it is now time to raise the age of legal sale of tobacco products from 18 to 21 and impose a levy on the profits of the big tobacco companies, in order to raise £700 million that we can put into smoking cessation services, on the basis that the polluter pays?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much, and he is absolutely right about smoking; it is the biggest single cause of preventable death in this country. As he will know, Javed Khan OBE is undertaking an independent review of smoking, and I am sure he will want to take my hon. Friend's suggestions into account.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the SNP here, Ian Blackford.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): In a matter of seconds, at 12.16 pm, a Virgin Atlantic aircraft is due to depart Heathrow airport to go to Warsaw to pick up 50 young orphans who have left Ukraine and are coming to spend the next period of their life in Scotland, with the sanctuary we can offer them. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has helped to make sure that we can offer a new start to these young people, away from the war. I thank the Governments in London and in Edinburgh, and in particular the immigration Minister, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), and the refugees Minister in the House of Lords, Lord Harrington. This is a good day for those 50 young people, but let us hope that it is the beginning of something much more significant for many more young people we can offer sanctuary to.

This morning, we have official confirmation that inflation is at its highest level in 30 years, but families do not need official confirmation to know that the cost of food and energy is now at a price they simply cannot afford. The very people who bore the brunt of the health pandemic are now being hammered by the poverty pandemic. This is not just a cost of living crisis—this is an emergency. That is why, in Scotland, the SNP Government are doubling the Scottish child payment and raising the benefits they control by 6%—that is double the rate the Chancellor has proposed for the benefits that he has control over. So this is a very simple question for the Prime Minister: if he truly understands that this is an emergency, will he match the Scottish Government's commitment and lift all benefits by 6%?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman very much. We all recognise that global inflation is causing a real cost of living crisis, not just here, but around the world; in the United States, inflation is now running at more than 8%, and we are at the levels in other European countries. We are doing everything we

can to help people. The Chancellor has put another £9.1 billion into reducing the costs of energy for families. *[Interruption.]* I do not know quite what Members are shouting out, but we want to do more. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that Scotland is in the lead in helping this country to solve its energy problems, not just with more offshore wind, but by abandoning the phobia of our own hydrocarbons, which I think are going to be vital for transition and to avoid our being blackmailed by Putin's Russia.

On the right hon. Gentleman's point about the orphans, I am grateful to him for his efforts and I thank him. If I may say so, without embarrassing him further, it is another example of the burgeoning co-operation between us.

Ian Blackford: Of course, we want to make sure we open our doors in Scotland and welcome refugees, and that we have that generosity of spirit—but we will leave that there for now.

I say to the Prime Minister that inflation is at 6% and increasing. We need to make sure that those who are the most vulnerable have that increase in benefits that they need in order to pay for fuel. The Chancellor needs to ditch the official photographer and listen to Martin Lewis. Family finances are at breaking point; they cannot tighten their budgets any more. These families have no room to manoeuvre, but the truth is that the Chancellor does. Lower borrowing and increased taxes mean that he is sitting with £20 billion to spend today. But instead this Chancellor is making a political choice: the choice to push people further into hardship by hiking taxes, cutting universal credit, and giving companies free rein to slash workers' pay through fire and rehire. So the test for the Prime Minister is this: will the Government use the full £20 billion they are sitting on to scrap the national insurance tax hike and put money into people's pockets, or will he simply make this Tory poverty pandemic even worse?

The Prime Minister: I just advise Mystic Meg over there that he has only 10 minutes to wait before he will have the answer to that question.

Q5. [906244] **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): I warmly welcome the improvements to our national Ukraine refugee response, but in the weeks since these improved measures, numbers fleeing Putin's invasion have sadly doubled to 3.5 million, and are expected to go even higher. Does the Prime Minister agree that our response must still move much faster, with a shift to processing applications in the UK and cutting the red tape and bureaucracy, so we can match the scale of Europe's worst humanitarian crisis since the second world war?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that we will see many more people coming here. He is right that the instincts of this country are to be as generous as possible. That is why we have made sure that applications can now be processed online very quickly, so people can come here with their passports. Under the family reunion scheme alone, I think the numbers are now running in excess of 16,000 people coming here.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): While Ofgem can cap rising gas and electricity bills, other fuels such as heating oil, liquefied petroleum gas and solid fuel remain unregulated. Many households in rural Scotland depend on such fuels. There are also areas awash with

energy, both on and offshore, yet with huge and rising numbers of people in fuel poverty. Will the Prime Minister regulate and cap such fuels, to alleviate hardship and end the perversity of energy-rich Scotland but fuel-poor Scots?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right that energy-rich Scotland and the hydrocarbons that we have in this country should be used to help the British people. We should not be needlessly reliant on oil and gas from Putin's Russia. I think that is the policy of Alba but, unfortunately, is not yet the policy of the SNP.

Q7. [906246] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): I am so proud to represent a vibrant Ukrainian community in Huddersfield and Colne Valley. This Friday, at the Ukrainian club in Huddersfield, they will be collecting medical supply donations to send to Ukraine and the surrounding nations. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking all our community in West Yorkshire, who have rallied round their Ukrainian neighbours and friends, and will he continue to put the UK at the forefront of donations of not only humanitarian and medical supplies, but the military aid that is allowing the Ukrainian people to fight so bravely against Putin and his cronies?

The Prime Minister: I thank the Ukrainian community in Yorkshire for everything they are doing and, of course, Ukrainian communities up and down the country and the people of this country as a whole. I am proud that we are the biggest bilateral donor, I think, other than the United States, of aid to Ukraine. I am also proud, as I know the whole House is, of the work that is being done continuously to give the Ukrainians the tools they need to defend themselves.

Q4. [906243] **Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The Football Association is refusing to move the semi-final between Liverpool and Manchester City from Wembley. There are no trains from the north-west that day, which means 50,000 or 60,000 people will have to go by road—bad for the fans and bad for the environment. Unfortunately, this is typical of the insensitivity of the FA, which thinks that fit and proper people to run our football clubs are Russian kleptocrats and people who are wanted for human rights abuses. Does the Prime Minister agree that now is the time to legislate to set up an independent regulator for football, with fan involvement?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much. I am not going to comment on the travel arrangements for the particular match—*[Interruption.]* The deputy Leader of the Labour party shouts for me to secure her a train. I am sure the FA will have heard the message that the hon. Gentleman has given.

What I can say is that I do agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who has just conducted a review on the matter, that we should indeed have an independent regulator for football.

Q12. [906251] **Holly Mumby-Croft** (Scunthorpe) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is a great champion for steel, and we have just had brilliant news on the removal of the US steel tariffs. Will he reaffirm the commitment he made at the Dispatch Box on 31 January that the Chancellor will bring forward a package of measures on our steel energy

costs? If the Chancellor is not able to make good that commitment today, will he ensure that he does so as soon as he can?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend passionately, and I think that it is vital that we undo the damage done by the insane policies of the previous Labour Government, which whacked up the cost of energy for British industry, including steel. I will be bringing forward a British energy security strategy that will address the needs of British steel, British ceramics and the whole of British industry.

Q6. [906245] **Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): I am sure the Prime Minister will share my delight that Bradford has been shortlisted to be the UK city of culture 2025 and will want to offer his support for our bid—it would bring immense benefits and kudos to Britain's youngest city. With over 120 languages spoken across the city, with its unique cultural heritage and diversity and, let us not forget, the amazing food, and as the birthplace of David Hockney and the Brontës, Bradford has it all—apart from Government support. One practical way in which the Prime Minister could help is by reversing the Transport Secretary's snub to Bradford in the integrated rail plan. So will the Prime Minister look again at this issue and commit to delivering a real northern powerhouse rail, including a stop in Bradford city?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate Bradford on being shortlisted in the way that that wonderful city has been, but I think the hon. Lady is wrong about what the integrated rail plan said, because it already commits to cutting the journey times from Leeds to Bradford from 20 minutes to 12 minutes, if I remember correctly. And we continue to look at ways of making sure that high-speed rail goes direct to Bradford.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The horrifying effects of events in Ukraine must be central to our focus, and we should do all possible to stand together in support. A war in Europe also has challenging domestic outcomes, with higher energy costs, rising food prices and effects on supplies and inflation and across the economy in general. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is a time when we need to come together as a nation common and that anyone seeking to weaponise Putin's deliberate and calculated consequences of the war will only undermine the unity of our nation at a time when Europe is in crisis?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for what he has said. One of the most important things that has confounded Vladimir Putin has been not only the heroic resistance of the Ukrainians but the unity of the rest of the world and, I must say, so far, the relative unity—the important unity—of this House.

Q8. [906247] **Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The Prime Minister has been very supportive of nuclear testing veterans, so I am sure that he will be shocked that, today, *The Mirror* has uncovered 140 pages of data previously hidden in the footnote of a 1988 Government report. There is now concern that the High Court and this House may have been inadvertently

misinformed in 2008, when told that only 159 men in UK nuclear weapons tests were exposed to dangerous radiation, given that today's data shows exposure numbers were actually 2,314. Will the Prime Minister urgently investigate this and arrange to meet personally in Downing Street with my constituent, her grandad and other nuclear testing veterans to bring an end to this national scandal?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member very much for bringing those facts—new facts—to the attention of the House, and I know that my office has already been in touch with the group concerned to make sure that we have a proper meeting. I hope very much that she will be there, and we will be able to discuss all the issues that she has raised.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): May I begin, as chair of the all-party party group on surrogacy, by thanking the Government, and the Home Secretary in particular for her work in bringing Ukrainian surrogates to safety here? Sadly, in my other role as chair of the all-party party group against antisemitism, I have to say that the news is not so positive. We have recently heard from Jewish students who are suffering record antisemitic attacks on university campuses, including allegations of their work being marked down by their own professors. This is completely outrageous, and one would expect the National Union of Students to be on their side, but instead of helping the students it has been inviting somebody who is engaged in antisemitic conspiracy theories—a rapper—to a conference. Will the Prime Minister do everything in his power to ensure that campuses are a safe place for British Jewish students?

The Prime Minister: Our universities have, for far too long, been tolerant of casual or indeed systematic antisemitism. I hope that everybody understands the need for change—for rapid and irreversible change—but it is also important that we have an antisemitism taskforce devoted to rooting out antisemitism in education at all levels.

Q9. [906248] **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): Last week, the Government did nothing to stop P&O Ferries sacking 800 seafarers on the spot. On the same day, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) was forced to come to the House to announce more than 1,100 DWP job losses and 42 centre closures, risking a further 7,000 jobs, including 1,300 in the north-east. Working people are, once again, being hammered by this Government in the middle of a cost of living crisis, which is causing genuine suffering. Why will the Prime Minister not act to protect local communities from losing real high-quality jobs?

The Prime Minister: I renew my sympathies with the case of the P&O workers, and I have explained to the House what we are doing, and we will do that. What we are also doing is helping the workforce up and down the country to get the coaching they need. We have doubled the number of work coaches, and what we are seeing is employment climbing and vacancies growing. We are helping this country into work, which is what Conservatives do.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I have a growing number of constituents who are struggling to go about their lives or even get to work because their driving licences are stuck at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. Will the Prime Minister make it clear at the Dispatch Box that the service from the agency falls significantly below what we expect, and will he ask the Transport Secretary to meet me, and any other Members of this House—we may need a big room—to explain how we can help the agency out of the hole in which it has put itself?

The Prime Minister: Yes. Like everybody in this House, I have read some surprising things about what has been going on at the DVLA. We need to make sure that it is given every possible encouragement and support to expedite the supply of driving licences to the people of this country.

Q10. [906249] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is nice to see the Prime Minister back in his place; I missed him last week.

A fantasy castle, perhaps Snow White, too, and certainly girls, girls, girls were promised at a party—less burlesque, more Berlusconi. According to a former Minister, it seems that the Prime Minister has been entertained at these bunga bunga parties, hosted by his close friend, a Russian oligarch. Given that his many weaknesses could leave him open to blackmail, why does the Prime Minister think that MI6 may not entirely trust him?

The Prime Minister: Last week, I was not here to benefit from one of the hon. Gentleman's elaborately confected questions. I admire his style, but I am afraid that I simply fail to detect any crouton of substance in the minestrone of nonsense that he has just spoken.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): Wrexham is a town based on brewing, mining and football. It is a town evolving in aspiration, prosperity and creativity while retaining its Welsh identity. Will the Prime Minister congratulate Wrexham on being shortlisted for the city of culture, and on being the first Welsh town to be so?

The Prime Minister: Not only is Wrexham shortlisted for the city of culture, with all the distinctions my hon. Friend mentions, but it is the city of vaccines. Without the AstraZeneca vaccines bottled in Wrexham, we literally would not be where we are today.

Q11. [906250] **James Murray** (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): Former Treasury Minister Lord Agnew has described the Chancellor's failure on covid fraud as "one of the most colossal cock-ups in recent government management and taxpayers are paying for this".

We now know the Chancellor's failure has cost the country £11.8 billion—almost exactly the same as the amount that national insurance on working people will increase in the coming year. Does the Prime Minister think it is fair to demand that working people pay the bill for the Chancellor's failures?

The Prime Minister: I remember the hon. Gentleman when he was doing planning at Islington Council, and

a complete cock-up he made of that. What I can tell him is that this Government made sure that we got the personal protective equipment and the supplies that were needed in record time. That was absolutely vital, at a time when the Opposition were calling on us to go further and faster. Never forget that under the last Labour Government, there was £23 billion lost in fraud every year.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): I welcome the important interim report from Dr Hilary Cass in which she highlights the need for more research into why so many young girls are presenting with gender distress. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me and other concerned colleagues to discuss how we can constructively support those young people who are experiencing gender distress?

The Prime Minister: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend. This is one of those issues that the whole House is coming to realise requires extreme sensitivity, tact, love and care. We must recognise that when people want to make a transition in their lives, they should be treated with the maximum possible generosity and respect. We have systems in this country that allow that and have done for a long time, and we should be very proud of that, but I want to say in addition that I think, when it comes to distinguishing between a man and a woman, the basic facts of biology remain overwhelmingly important.

Q13. [906252] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister met the chairman of P&O owners DP World to discuss setting up a freeport in London. Just last year, the Foreign Secretary also met DP World. DP World runs ports in the UK that employ more than 600 workers. If the Prime Minister wants to remove the latest suspicion of his conflicts of interest, will he tell his Dubai millionaire friends that if they want contracts to run freeports here, they must reinstate P&O workers and guarantee the jobs of DP World workers too?

Mr Speaker: Order. We need to use more moderate and temperate language in this Chamber.

The Prime Minister: I have one overwhelming interest, which is to protect and preserve the jobs and livelihoods of the British people. That is what we are doing. That is what we will do with the P&O workers, but we will also ensure that we continue to attract overseas investment in the record ways we currently are. The Opposition would drive it away—we will not.

Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): This year marks the 50th anniversary of the expulsion of Asians from Uganda, the country where I was born. Under Ted Heath's Government, people across the country opened up their homes for many of those Asians, who then settled and became part of the fabric of our great nation. That British generosity is again being seen as people open up their homes for those fleeing Ukraine and coming to our country. May I urge the Prime Minister to pick up those files from 50 years ago, wipe off the dust and take on board those positive lessons, so that we can ensure that the Homes for Ukraine scheme has maximum success?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I think the whole country can be proud of the way the UK welcomed people fleeing Idi Amin's Uganda. Several Members of the House, including the Home Secretary herself and her family, were beneficiaries of that scheme and that moment. This country is overwhelmingly generous to people fleeing in fear of their lives and will continue to be so.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Eight hundred British workers were sacked over Zoom by P&O, owned by the Government of Dubai, to be replaced with foreign exploited agency workers on less than two quid an hour. The Prime Minister can pass an instrument now to close the loophole so that the national minimum wage applies on UK international routes. Is he going to stand up for British workers or the oil state dictator Dubai?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question. I knew he was going to ask it and he was right to ask it. I anticipated his question

earlier on. We are going to make sure that everybody working in the UK exclusive economic zone gets paid the living wage, and we will do it as fast as we possibly can with the Opposition's assistance.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to take legal action to hold P&O Ferries and DP World to account. I again call on them to reverse their action and reinstate the workers. Dover and Kent are already badly affected by this business, including on the roads and in the business community. Will he meet me to discuss specific support for our affected area, including the A2 upgrade for national transport links and an east Kent enterprise zone to cover and include the port of Dover?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right in what she says about P&O and about the 800 workers. I will make sure that she gets all the meetings she needs to make sure that we continue with all our fantastic investments in Dover, whether transport, education or otherwise.

Financial Statement

12.43 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): As I stand here, men, women and children are huddled in basements across Ukraine seeking protection. Soldiers and citizens alike have taken up arms to defend their land and families. The sorrow we feel for their suffering, and the admiration for their bravery, is only matched by the gratitude we feel for the security in which we live—and what underpins that security is the strength of our economy. It gives us the ability to fund the armed forces we need to maintain our liberty, the resources we need to support our allies, the power to impose sanctions which cause severe economic costs, and the flexibility to support businesses and individuals through crises as they emerge. We should be in no doubt: behind Putin's invasion is a dangerous calculation that democracies are divided, politically weak and economically insecure, and incapable of making tough long-term decisions to strengthen our economies. This calculation is mistaken. What the authoritarian mind perceives as division we know are the passionate disagreements at the heart of our living, breathing democracy. What they see as chaos we know is the freedom to be dynamic and innovative. What they call the inherent weakness of open societies and free economies we know is the source of our strength.

We will confront this challenge to our values not just in the arms and resources we send to Ukraine, but in strengthening our economy here at home. When I talk about security, yes, I mean responding to the war in Ukraine, but I also mean the security of a faster growing economy, the security of more resilient public finances, and security for working families as we help with the cost of living.

Today's statement builds a stronger, more secure economy for the United Kingdom. We have a moral responsibility to use our economic strength to support Ukraine and work with international partners to impose severe costs on Putin's regime. We are: supplying military aid to help Ukraine defend its borders; providing around £400 million in economic and humanitarian aid, as well as up to \$0.5 billion in multilateral financial guarantees; launching the new Homes for Ukraine scheme to make sure that those forced to flee have a route to safety here in the UK; and imposing sanctions of unprecedented scale and scope. We have: sanctioned more than 1,000 individuals, entities and subsidiaries; frozen the assets of major Russian banks; imposed punitive tariffs on key products; restricted Russia's access to sterling clearing, to insurance, to the UK's capital markets and to SWIFT; and we have targeted the Russian central bank, too.

Be in no doubt, these sanctions, co-ordinated with our allies, are working. The Russian rouble plummeted to record lows. The Moscow stock exchange has been largely suspended for a month, and the Central Bank of Russia has been forced to more than double interest rates to 20%. We warned that an aggressive, unprovoked invasion would be met with severe economic costs, and it has. I am proud to say, as the whole House will say: we stand with Ukraine.

But the actions we have taken to sanction Putin's regime are not cost free for us at home. The invasion of Ukraine presents a risk to our recovery, as it does to

countries around the world. We came into this crisis with our economy growing faster than expected, with the UK having the highest growth in the G7 last year. But the Office for Budget Responsibility has said specifically:

"There is unusually high uncertainty around the outlook".

It is too early to know the full impact of the Ukraine war on the UK economy, but its initial view, combined with high global inflation and continuing supply chain pressures, means that the OBR now forecasts growth this year of 3.8%. The OBR then expects the economy to grow by 1.8% in 2023, and 2.1%, 1.8% and 1.7% in the following three years. The House will take comfort from the fact that the lower growth outlook has not affected our strong jobs performance. Unemployment is now forecast to be lower in every year of the forecast. It is already at 3.9%—back to the low levels we saw before the pandemic.

But the war's most significant impact domestically is on the cost of living. Covid and global factors meant goods and energy prices were already high. Statistics published this morning show that inflation in February was 6.2%. That is lower than the US and broadly in line with the euro area. Disruptions to global supply chains and energy markets, combined with the economic response to Putin's aggression, mean that the OBR expects it to rise further, averaging 7.4% this year.

As I said last month, the Government will support the British people as they deal with the rising costs of energy. People should know that we will stand by them, as we have throughout the last two years. That is why we have announced a £9 billion plan to help around 28 million households pay around half the April increase in the energy price cap. People should be reassured that the energy price cap will protect their energy bills between now and the autumn, but I want to help people now, so I am announcing three immediate measures.

First, I am going to help motorists. Today I can announce that for only the second time in 20 years, fuel duty will be cut. Not by 1p, not even by 2p, but by 5p per litre—the biggest cut in all fuel duty rates ever. While some have called for the cut to last until August, I have decided it will be in place until March next year—a full 12 months. Together with the freeze, it is a tax cut this year for hard-working families and businesses worth over £5 billion, and it will take effect from 6 pm tonight.

Secondly, as energy costs rise, we know that energy efficiency will make a big difference to bills, but if homeowners want to install energy-saving materials, at the moment only some items qualify for 5% VAT relief and there are complex rules about who is eligible. The relief used to be more generous but from 2019 the European Court of Justice required us to restrict its eligibility.

Thanks to Brexit, we are no longer constrained by EU law, so I can announce that for the next five years, homeowners having materials such as solar panels, heat pumps and insulation installed will no longer pay 5% VAT; they will pay zero. We will also reverse the EU's decision to take wind and water turbines out of scope and zero-rate them as well—and we will abolish all the red tape imposed on us by the EU. A family having a solar panel set installed will see tax savings worth £1,000 and savings on their energy bill of over £300 per year.

This policy highlights the deficiencies in the Northern Ireland protocol. We will not immediately be able to apply it to Northern Ireland, but we will be raising it

with the Commission as a matter of urgency, and I want to reassure Members from Northern Ireland that the Executive will receive a Barnett share of the value of the relief until it can be introduced UK-wide. The Prime Minister will bring forward further measures to reinforce our long-term energy security in the coming weeks.

Finally, I want to do more to help our most vulnerable households with rising costs. They need targeted support, so I am doubling the household support fund to £1 billion with £500 million of new funding. Local authorities are best placed to help those in need in their local areas, and they will receive this funding from April.

We can only afford to provide this extra support because of our stronger economy and the tough but responsible decisions we have taken to rebuild our fiscal resilience. Today's forecasts confirm that even after the measures I am announcing today, we are meeting all our fiscal rules. Underlying debt is expected to fall steadily from 83.5% of GDP in 2022-23 to 79.8% in 2026-27. Borrowing as a percentage of GDP is 5.4% this year, 3.9% next year, and then 1.9%, 1.3%, 1.2% and 1.1% in the following years.

At a time when the OBR has said that our fiscal headroom could be

"wiped out by relatively small changes to the economic outlook,"

it is right that the central fiscal judgement I am making today is to meet our fiscal rules with a margin of safety. The OBR has not accounted for the full impacts of the war in Ukraine, and we should be prepared for the economy and public finances to worsen, potentially significantly.

The cost of borrowing is continuing to rise. In the next financial year, we are forecast to spend £83 billion on debt interest—the highest on record and almost four times the amount we spent last year. That is why we have already taken difficult decisions with the public finances, and that is why we will continue to weigh carefully calls for additional public spending. More borrowing is not cost or risk free. I said it last autumn, and I say it again today: borrowing down; debt down—only the Conservatives can be trusted with taxpayers' money.

Our response to the immediate crisis in Ukraine has been unwavering, but we must be equally bold in response to the deeper and more fundamental challenge Putin poses to our values. We must show the world that freedom and democracy remain the best route to peace, prosperity and happiness. We will do so by strengthening our economy here at home. To that end, we are helping families with the cost of living, creating the conditions for accelerated growth and productivity, and making sure that the proceeds of growth are shared fairly. That is not the work of any one statement, but it does begin today, and with one of our most important levers: the tax system.

I told the House last autumn that my overarching ambition was to reduce taxes by the end of this Parliament, and we will do so in a way that is responsible and sustainable. Today, I am publishing a tax plan. We will take a principled approach to cutting taxes: maintaining space against our fiscal rules, as I have done today; continuing to be disciplined, with the first call on any extra resources being lower taxes, not higher spending; and, of course, carefully considering the broader macroeconomic outlook.

With those principles in mind, our new tax plan will build a stronger economy by reducing and reforming taxes over this Parliament, in three ways. First, we will help families with the cost of living; secondly, we will create the conditions for higher growth; and thirdly, we will share the proceeds of growth fairly, ensuring people are left with more of their own money. Let me take each in turn.

There is now a dedicated funding source for the country's top priority, the NHS and social care, providing funding over the long term as demand grows, with every penny going straight to health and care. If it goes, then so does the funding, and that funding is needed now, especially as my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary's plans to reform healthcare will ensure every pound of taxpayers' money is well spent. When I said the Conservatives were the party of public services—the party of the NHS—I did not just mean when it was easy; it is a total commitment.

So it is right that the health and care levy stays, but a long-term funding solution for the NHS and social care is not incompatible with reducing taxes on working families. Over the last decade, it has been a Conservative mission to promote tax cuts for working people and simplify the system. That is why Conservative-led Governments raised the income tax personal allowance from £6,500 in 2010 to the new level of £12,570. But the equivalent thresholds in national insurance, which define how much people can earn NICs-free, are still around £3,000 less.

The Prime Minister pledged in the 2019 election that we would increase those thresholds. We made a big step towards that goal in my first Budget in 2020, increasing the national insurance threshold to £9,500. Today, we take the next step. Our current plan is to increase the NICs threshold this year by £300, but I am not going to do that. I am going to increase it by the full £3,000, delivering our promise to fully equalise the NICs and income tax thresholds—and not incrementally over many years, but in one go this year. From this July, people will be able to earn £12,570 a year without paying a single penny of income tax or national insurance.

That is a £6 billion personal tax cut for 30 million people across the United Kingdom, a tax cut for employees worth over £330 a year, the largest increase in a basic rate threshold ever, and the largest single personal tax cut in a decade. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has called it

"the best way to help low and middle earners through the tax system".

It creates what the Centre for Policy Studies has called a "universal working income". It is a tax cut that rewards work, and around 70% of all workers will have their taxes cut by more than the amount they will pay through the new levy, once again showing that it is this Conservative Government delivering for hard-working families and helping with the cost of living.

The first part of our tax plan for a stronger economy is to support families with the cost of living, but as I set out in last month's Mais lecture, to lift our growth and productivity, we need the private sector to train more, invest more and innovate more. People, capital, ideas: that is how we will create a new culture of enterprise—the second part of our tax plan. The plan sets out tax-cutting options on business investment and innovation, with final decisions to be announced in the autumn Budget, but these are significant and complex questions, so we

[*Rishi Sunak*]

will work with businesses over the summer to get the answers right. Let me explain to the House the direction of travel.

First, on people, we lag behind international peers on adult technical skills. Just 18% of 25 to 64-year-olds hold vocational qualifications, which is a third lower than the OECD average, and UK employers spend just half the European average on training their employees. We will consider whether the current tax system, including the operation of the apprenticeship levy, is doing enough to incentivise businesses to invest in the right kinds of training.

Secondly, on ideas, over the last 50 years, innovation drove around half the UK's productivity growth, but since the financial crisis, the rate of increase has slowed more than in other countries. Our lower rate of innovation explains almost all our productivity gap with the United States. Right now, we know that the amount that businesses spend on research and development as a percentage of GDP is less than half the OECD average, and that is despite us spending more on tax reliefs than almost every other country. Something is not working, so we will reform R&D tax credits so that they are effective and better value for money; we will expand the generosity of the reliefs so that they include data, cloud computing and pure maths; and we will consider, in the autumn, whether to make the R&D expenditure credit more generous.

Thirdly, on capital, weak private sector investment is a long-standing cause of our productivity gap internationally: capital investment by UK businesses is considerably lower than the OECD average of 14%, and it accounts for fully half our productivity gap with France and Germany. Once the super deduction ends next year, our overall tax treatment for capital investment will be far less generous than that of other advanced economies. We are going to fix that. In the autumn Budget, we will cut the tax rates on business investment, and I look forward to discussing the best ways to do that with businesses. People, capital, ideas—three priorities for business tax cuts this autumn.

But I want to help smaller businesses right now, so let me remind the House of our plan. Our business rates discount will take effect in April for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. They will get a 50% discount on their business rates bill, up to £110,000. A typical pub will save £5,000. That is a tax cut for hundreds of thousands of small businesses, worth £1.7 billion, taking effect in just a week's time. Our Help to Grow Management scheme offers businesses mini-MBAs, 90% funded by Government—a benefit worth several thousand pounds—and Help to Grow Digital gives businesses a 50% discount on buying new software, up to £5,000. We have also increased the annual investment allowance to £1 million, so that small and medium-sized businesses will feel the benefit of full expensing.

I want to respond to the specific calls from small businesses with one further announcement today. The employment allowance cuts small businesses' tax bills, making it cheaper to employ workers. In my first Budget two years ago, I increased that allowance. Today, I am going further. From April, the employment allowance will increase to £5,000. That is a new tax cut worth up to £1,000 for half a million small businesses, starting in just two weeks' time. Future tax cuts on business investment

and innovation; a business rates discount worth £1.7 billion; Help to Grow schemes worth thousands of pounds per business; an annual investment allowance worth up to £1 million; and a new tax cut on the costs of employment, worth £1,000 per company—once again, it is this Conservative Government delivering for British business.

The tax plan I have announced today will help people and businesses to deal with rising costs, and will help raise the future growth rate of this country, but we want the proceeds of growth shared fairly—the third objective of our tax plan. The knowledge that people can keep more of what they earn is a powerful incentive for people to work hard. It means greater economic security, and we know that individuals spend their money better than Governments do. We have already announced today the equalisation of personal tax thresholds, giving over 30 million workers a tax cut worth over £330, and over time I want to go further; but tax cuts must be paid for, must be prioritised, and must fit the economic circumstances of the time. A clear goal for Conservative Chancellors, and even some Labour ones, has been to cut income tax. The fact that this has happened only twice in 20 years tells us how hard it is to do. Covid and the war in Ukraine have only added to the difficulty of achieving this by the end of this Parliament. I am sure that all Members of the House recognise and understand those challenges. It would clearly be irresponsible to meet that ambition this year, yet I refuse to let it wither and drift.

By 2024, the Office for Budget Responsibility currently expects inflation to be back under control, debt to be falling sustainably, and the economy to be growing. Our fiscal rules are met with a clear margin of safety, so my final announcement today is this: I can confirm that before the end of this Parliament, in 2024, for the first time in 16 years, the basic rate of income tax will be cut from 20p to 19p in the pound—a tax cut for workers, for pensioners, and for savers, and a £5 billion tax cut for 30 million people. Let me be clear with the House: it is fully costed and fully paid for in the plans announced today. Last year, I told the House that I would cut taxes for hard-working families, but I would do so in a responsible and sustainable way, and today I am delivering on that promise.

Cutting taxes is not easy. It requires hard work, prioritisation, and willingness to make difficult and often unpopular arguments elsewhere. It is only because this Government have been prepared to make difficult but responsible choices in order to fix our public finances that I can stand here and tell this House not only that taxes are being cut, but that debt is also falling while public spending is increasing. That does not happen by accident. We can deliver for the British people today and into the future because, unlike the Labour party, we have a plan—a plan that reforms and improves public services, a plan to grow our economy, a plan to level up across the United Kingdom, a plan that helps families with the cost of living and, yes, a tax plan that cuts taxes for working families by over £330. It cuts taxes on fuel by 5p per litre. It cuts taxes on business and, yes, for the first time in a long time, it cuts income tax. Let me end by simply saying this: my tax plan delivers the biggest net cut to personal taxes in over a quarter of a century, and I commend it to the House.

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: Order. The House heard the Chancellor, quite rightly, and I want the same respect shown to the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves.

1.11 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Today was the day that the Chancellor could have put a windfall tax on oil and gas producers to provide real help for families, but he did not. Today was the day he could have set out a proper plan to support businesses and create good jobs, but he did not. Today was the day that he could properly have scrapped his national insurance hike, but he did not. Labour said it was the wrong tax at the wrong time, and the wrong choice; and today the Chancellor has finally admitted that he got that one wrong. Inflation is at its highest level for 30 years, and rising. Energy prices are at record highs, and people are worried sick. For all his words, it is clear that the Chancellor does not understand the scale of the challenge. He talks about providing security for working families, but his choices are making the cost of living crisis worse, not better.

The situation following Putin's criminal assault on Ukraine remains gravely serious. Just one month after the invasion, so much has changed, and there will be repercussions for years to come. The Chancellor has today failed to explain why he chose to sign off on a reduction in our country's armed forces last October. Will he confirm whether the Government's target Army size is still being reduced by 10,000 troops? I say this to the Chancellor: Labour will support whatever is needed on defence and security, in order to keep our country safe.

The tremors following Putin's aggression will impact Britain, including economically, but the cost of living crisis predates Putin's attack on Ukraine. In October, inflation was already forecast to be double the Bank of England's target, yet the Prime Minister said that fears of inflation were unfounded. Today we learn that inflation has reached 6.2%, and it is expected to go higher in the coming months. People are rightly looking to their Government to help them weather this storm. Labour will support sensible measures to ease the pressure, but what the Chancellor has announced today says everything we need to know about his priorities.

The cost of living crisis is hitting people particularly hard because incomes have been squeezed during the past 12 years of Conservative Governments. Ordinary families, disabled people, and pensioners are facing difficult choices. Mums are skipping meals so that their children do not. Families are struggling to buy new school shoes and uniforms for their children. Older people are hesitating to put the heating on, because they are worried about the cost.

At the weekend, the Chancellor was asked about fuel poverty, and he did not even know the numbers. That is shameful, because when Martin Lewis predicts that 10 million people could be pushed into fuel poverty, the Chancellor should sit up and listen. We know that pensions and social security will not keep up with inflation, and pensioners and those on social security will be getting a real-terms cut to their income. What analysis has the Chancellor done on the impact of benefits being uprated by less than inflation? How many more children and pensioners will drift into poverty because of the choices of this Government?

Who does the Chancellor prioritise? He continues to defend the record profits of oil and gas producers, who themselves admit that they have more money than they know what to do with. BP describes this crisis as a "cash machine" for it, but it is British people who are paying out. It is deeply regrettable that the SNP has joined the Tories in wanting to shield oil and gas producers from Labour's progressive measures. When I set out Labour's plans for a windfall tax in January, we estimated that it would have raised £1.2 billion. Because of the continued rise in global oil and gas prices, it would today raise more than £3 billion. That money could be used to help families, pensioners and businesses, with a cut to VAT being a real Brexit dividend that would help working families and pensioners across our country. A targeted warm home discount would see families and pensioners on the lowest and modest incomes supported by £600.

Today the Chancellor comes along, after 12 years of failure on energy efficiency, and announces a VAT cut on building materials. That is wholly inadequate. A proper energy-efficient scheme, such as that set out by Labour, could cut bills by £400 for people from next year. The silence from the Chancellor about our energy intensive manufacturing industries is appalling. At this time of national crisis, people and businesses need a Government who are on their side.

The Chancellor spoke of difficult choices, and I agree. There are always choices to be made, such as who to tax and who to shield. Despite his reluctant measures, he is still taking money out of people's purses and wallets with an increase in national insurance contributions. The changes he is making today prompt a question about why he embarked on them in the first place, despite warnings from the Labour party and from many, many others. It is one thing for the Prime Minister and Chancellor to disagree with each other, but the centrepiece of the Chancellor's statement today is based on a disagreement with himself. For all his tax rises for millions in the middle, where is the increased tax contribution from the wealthiest in society? A landlord with a large number of properties will not pay a penny more in taxes, but their tenants will. Someone with significant income from buying and selling stocks and shares will not be paying any more in tax, but those people powering our economy will be. The Chancellor has made the wrong choices.

The Chancellor says that we cannot help everyone, which is absolutely true. But who has he been helping out? Those who have been swindling the taxpayer. The Chancellor left open the vaults for widespread waste, crony contracts, and a frenzy of fraud. It was, as his former Tory Treasury Minister put it,

"happy days if you were a crook."

Seven billion items of personal protective equipment—not usable—are now being burned. Taxpayers' money is literally going up in smoke, and £3.5 billion worth of contracts were awarded to friends, donors and pub landlords. And it gets worse. The Chancellor has been signing cheques to fraudsters, including organised criminals and drug dealers. Let us put the Chancellor's fraud failure in context. He has lost a staggering £11.8 billion of public money to fraud. That is twice the amount that a previous Conservative Government lost on Black Wednesday. As a result of—let us face it—that jaw-dropping incompetence, the Conservatives have been funding crime instead of fighting it. Now the Chancellor has the

[Rachel Reeves]

audacity to come to British taxpayers to ask them to pay more to fill his black hole. There can be no cover-up to hide political embarrassments, so let us call in the National Crime Agency to investigate. We need answers and people to be held to account, because—let us be clear—taxpayers want their money back.

The truth is that people can no longer afford the Conservatives. Working families cannot, pensioners cannot and businesses cannot. The weak growth forecasts we have seen today should be flashing red on the Chancellor's desk. The Chancellor said, in his statement, that the work starts today. Is he serious? The Conservatives have been in government for 12 years, not 12 hours. What has taken them so long? Since his party entered government, the UK has experienced the biggest downgrade in growth of any major economy. Under the last Labour Government, economic growth was 2.1% a year. In the last 12 years under the Conservatives, it has averaged 1.5%. Now we know that growth has been downgraded this year too. Growth is essential for funding our public services, keeping taxes under control and keeping a handle on public finances too. That is why Labour has announced a tough set of fiscal rules to get our debt and our deficit down. The truth is that, because of the Government's failure to get the economy growing, the Chancellor has had to put up taxes on families and businesses a staggering 15 times.

The Chancellor has raised taxes more in the last two years than any previous Chancellor in the last 50. He says it is all down to the pandemic, but the truth is that the Conservatives have become the party of high taxation because they are the party of low growth. I understand that the Chancellor has a portrait of Nigel Lawson above his desk. Well, today we have an energy price crisis, record prices at the pumps and inflation is back. The truth is that he is not Nigel Lawson; he is Ted Heath with an Instagram account.

Labour would get the economy firing on all cylinders, ensuring that we buy, make and sell more in Britain, scrapping business rates and replacing them with a fairer system fit for the 21st century, something that small and high street businesses are crying out for, and the Chancellor mentioned not at all in his statement today. Labour would make a climate investment pledge to decarbonise the economy, create good jobs in every part of Britain and strengthen our energy security too. Businesses are seeing unprecedented increases in their costs right now, but all we hear from the Chancellor today is the promise of jam tomorrow, not the support that is needed now. Today's statement lacks the long-term plan for productivity, skills and growth. Where is it?

I cannot help but feel that in both the Chancellor's recent Mais lecture and his statement today we are presented with increasingly incredible claims. Perhaps the Chancellor has been taking inspiration from the characters in *Alice in Wonderland* or should I say, *Alice in Sunakland*? Because nothing there is quite as it seems. It is the sort of place where a Chancellor celebrates giving people £200 to help them with their spiralling energy bills, before explaining that he needs it all back. In *Sunakland*, the Chancellor proclaims, "I believe in lower taxes", at the same time as hiking *Alice's* national insurance contributions. So *Alice* asks the Chancellor,

"When did lower taxes mean higher taxes? Has down become the new up?" The Chancellor follows Humpty Dumpty's advice and says,

"When I use a word...it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

Alice knows that under the Conservatives taxes are at their highest level in decades, as a result of the policies of this very same Chancellor. In fact, he was the only G7 finance Minister to raise taxes on working people during this crucial year of recovery. Curiouser and curiouser. As *Alice* climbs out of the rabbit hole to leave *Sunakland*, she recalls the words of the White Rabbit and concludes that perhaps the Chancellor's reality is just different from hers.

The actual reality is that the Chancellor's failure to back a windfall tax, and his stubborn desire to pursue a national insurance tax rise, are the wrong choices. In eight days' time, people's energy bills will rise by 54%. Two weeks today, the Chancellor's latest tax hike will start hitting working people and their employers. His national insurance tax rise was a bad idea last September, and he has admitted that it is an even worse one today. The Chancellor is making an historic mistake. Today was the day to scrap the tax rise on jobs. Today was the day to bring forward a windfall tax. Today was the day for the Chancellor to set out a plan to support British businesses. But on the basis of the statement today and the misguided choices of the Chancellor, families and businesses will endure significant hardship. The Chancellor has failed to appreciate the scale of the challenge that we face and, yet again, he is making the wrong choices for our country.

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) for her response. She raised several points that I will come to in due course, but listening to her speech it sounded as though covid, and the huge damage it did to our economy and public finances, had never actually happened. It sounded as though we did not have to introduce furlough, support businesses and provide emergency funding to schools, councils and, yes, the NHS. While her party supported all those policies at the time, it now seems unwilling to pay for them. There is a pattern there. Labour is always happy to spend taxpayers' money, but not to take care of it.

On some of the hon. Lady's specific points, it was telling that she opened her statement by yet again calling for a windfall tax. On this side of the House, we want to encourage more investment in the North sea, and we want more domestic energy and more jobs for the UK. A windfall tax would put that off, which is why the Prime Minister will bring forward a comprehensive energy security strategy in the coming weeks to address that.

The hon. Lady talked about business rates and supporting businesses. In just a week's time, small businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sector will get a 50% discount on their business rates bill. It is the biggest cut to business rates outside of coronavirus since the business rate system was created—£1.7 billion. I know that she has said that she would like to abolish business rates. She also says she has some fiscal rules, but I have not quite figured out how she will pay for the £25 billion of tax cuts that that would involve—I look forward to hearing it. She talked about defence spending. It is all very well to talk about the size of the Army. At least Labour now seems to think that we should actually

have an Army, which is a welcome conversion. It is because of how seriously we take the nation's security that in 2020, when we had decided to do short-term spending settlements for most Departments, we singled out one Department for special treatment and gave it a four-year settlement in advance of everyone else—that was the Ministry of Defence. In that settlement it received £24 billion of new cash, the largest uplift to defence spending since the end of the cold war, ensuring that we are not just the second-largest spender in Europe in NATO but the fifth largest in the world, a record of which we on the Conservative Benches are very proud.

The hon. Lady talked about pensions. Again, thanks to the actions of Conservative-led Governments since 2010, we put in place the triple lock—not something the Labour party ever did when it was in power. It means that pensions are now £2,300 higher than they were in 2010 and £700 more than if the triple lock had not been in existence during that time. I am pleased to say that the state pension, relative to earnings, is now at its highest level in over 30 years. This party will always be on the side of pensioners.

Turning briefly to the hon. Lady's comments on tax—fair enough, it is a short time in which to have to respond, but I am not sure if she fully understood the implications of the tax cut announced today. The increase in the national insurance thresholds to equalise them fully is a £6 billion tax cut for 30 million UK workers. It is the largest increase in thresholds ever, the biggest personal tax cut in a decade, and it is worth £330 for those workers. I do not know whether she realised this, because she talked about the levy and making sure that we direct our policy at those who need our help, but there is a reason the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies called this increase the best way to help low and middle earners through the tax system: 70% of workers will pay less tax, even accounting for the levy. It is more generous than the policy she is advocating. Combined with the other tax cuts we have announced today, this plan represents the biggest net cut to personal taxes in a quarter of a century.

Let me conclude by saying this. The plan we have announced today has only been possible because we have taken tough decisions with the public finances. They have not always necessarily been popular, but they always been responsible and always honest. It is two years to the day that the country first entered lockdown and suffered the biggest economic shock in over 300 years. An unprecedented collective national effort was undertaken and two years later this Government have not only fixed the public finances but people are back in jobs, debt is falling and taxes are now being cut. No Government can get every call right. We learn from our mistakes and we strive to improve. But even if they will not admit it, Labour Members will recognise this day as an achievement that we all can celebrate. I have said it before to the Labour party and I will say it again: there is a fine line between reasonable criticism and political opportunism, and in my experience the British people can always tell the difference.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I think the shadow Chancellor's remarks will be best remembered for pointing out that the Conservatives won the 2010 election and the 2019 election. It is probably a very good thing for the country that we did.

The Chancellor has met the major obligations on public spending which helps the economy to grow and which allows for more jobs and more Government revenue. As he pointed out just now, the changes to national insurance do the things that Martin Lewis, as well as the institutes, would applaud. Those three sources of support—he has my support, too—are very welcome.

May I ask the Chancellor to remember that pensioners do not just have the state pension? Many have fixed pensions on top and getting inflation down as fast as possible is vital to them. They cannot go for a bigger pay increase if they are not at work.

Finally, some areas of public spending do not make it easy to have efficiencies. If teachers' salaries make up most of the cost of education, it is very important to ensure that we do not squeeze education and wreck our schools and our pupils' future.

On cladding, when amendments to the Building Safety Bill come from the other place, can my right hon. Friend please not keep his purse completely shut? If money needs to be advanced so that homes can be safe and saleable, will he please consider that openly?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for his support and he is right to highlight some of the independent commentators who have supported the policies announced today. I will touch on one of the things he said, which was about education spending. I agree that it is vital for our country's future that we support our teachers and children. That is why the Prime Minister announced, in total, £5 billion of catch-up funding to help children to recover the learning they lost during the pandemic, why we are raising per pupil cash amounts by £1,500 over the Parliament, and why we are raising teachers' starting salaries to £30,000, as our manifesto committed to doing.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): This tax plan that the Chancellor has announced is very thin. It is lightweight and it is superficial. It is exactly what we have come to expect from this Chancellor. What we heard today from the Chancellor was not enough. It was utterly detached from the needs of our constituents up and down these islands.

This cost of living crisis has been a decade in the making, layer upon layer: austerity, which stripped back public services and punished people through brutal social security cuts; Brexit, which has driven away skilled workers and increased costs for businesses and individuals; covid, where we saw public money splurged in its billions on crony contracts while some people were entirely excluded from support, and now those who got support under the self-employment income support scheme are expected to pay tax on it, just to add insult to injury; and now home energy costs, which were already soaring before the increase in hostilities in Ukraine, are forcing households to the brink. Inflation running at 6.2%, its highest rate in 30 years, is hitting the poorest the hardest. Food prices are rising, especially for the basics, and foodbanks are seeing record numbers of people coming through their doors. The Chancellor says he is going to increase the household support fund, but is that it? Is that it? People are desperate and they need a good deal more help than that.

We know that sanctioning Russia is not cost-free, but the Tories cannot use that as a sleight of hand to distract from the layers of pain that lie beneath the

[Alison Thewliss]

current crisis. Each of those layers has seen political choices and opportunities for change squandered by this UK Tory Government and their predecessors. We see it again today. This Chancellor has increased taxes more in two years than Gordon Brown did in 10, while people are struggling. The Treasury Committee issued a report this morning, which states that the UK Government “must take further action to support UK households, in particular those on lower incomes to manage the subsequent rise in energy and other costs.”

The Chancellor’s announcement on national insurance contributions is welcome. We have been calling for it for years. It is not something that the Chancellor should have brought today; it is something he should have brought to the House a long time ago. Hiking national insurance is a tax on individuals, but it is also a tax on jobs. Employers are already facing increased costs in energy and materials, and many businesses will not be able to bear such pressure. Small and medium-sized enterprises in particular need more support. Hospitality and tourism have struggled through the pandemic and now the Chancellor is moving VAT from 12.5% back to 20% at a time when consumers have much less money in their pockets. We on the SNP Benches called for the cut before the Chancellor brought it in, and we support UK Hospitality’s “VAT’s enough” campaign.

Universal credit has been cut by £20 a week at a time when people need it the most. Carly, a single mum, spoke at the Gingerbread reception on Monday and told us all how important it was that that money was there, because things are tighter than they have ever been. There is no further support for people on legacy benefits and disabled people who often face higher energy costs and have no option on those costs. A taper has been put in place that helps only people who are in work. Benefits are just not going far enough, as they do not keep pace with inflation, and the welfare cap punishes people for their circumstances. There has been an end to the triple lock on pensions and there is nothing for the WASPI women, who are campaigning outside today, who are still losing out on what should have rightfully been theirs.

The Scottish Government, by contrast, are doing what they can within their limited budget, to support people: uprating the eight Scottish social security benefits we control by 6% and increasing the Scottish child payment to £20 a week—a lifeline to families. This UK Government should be doing the same. Taking 5p off fuel is something, but it does not help those who are paying for trains and buses. The Chancellor cut air passenger duty during COP26 but he still offers nothing for the millions of commuters who use public transport every day.

I do not know if the Chancellor has ever had a prepayment meter—I do not think they fit them for swimming pools. However, 4.5 million people—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members say it is “pathetic”, but 4.5 million people across these islands experience the stress and despair of watching the money on their prepayment meters run out. Prepayment customers already pay higher bills than those on direct debit and they may struggle even to access the Chancellor’s “heat now, pay later” loan—if it does not automatically go to pay back the debts on that meter. The Fuel Bank Foundation,

which provides top-ups to those on prepayment meters who are struggling, has seen a 75% increase in demand already. That was before the prices that we are seeing now.

There was nothing either from the Chancellor for customers using heating oil or LPG, who must fill up by the tank. Those on heating oil have seen their tank costs—for 500 litres in a tank—go from £250 to between £600 and £900. They have no choice about how to get that energy. Where are they in the Chancellor’s priorities today?

Nuclear energy—which the Government touted an awful lot before today and which, interestingly, was missing from the Chancellor’s statement—is not the answer to reducing people’s bills. It is slow and eye-wateringly expensive. We know from the Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill that the Government’s proposals will add £63 billion to people’s energy bills. They should instead fix the long-standing inequality of grid charging, invest more in onshore and offshore wind, tidal and solar, and bring carbon capture and storage in the north-east of Scotland off their reserve bench. They should make it a real net zero transition worthy of the name.

The Government could invest in a national programme of heat pumps, retrofitting and insulating. I was glad to see the Chancellor’s announcement on home energy efficiency and repairs, because we have called for that for a long time. However, this paltry announcement does not go nearly far enough and does not even meet the significant home energy interventions that Scotland is making.

The Chancellor has choices. He could have looked at a windfall tax on profits. The shadow Chancellor, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), was right about oil and gas, but why should Amazon, Serco and Netflix not have to pay up for their mega-profits during the pandemic?

The Chancellor has had a windfall of his own. Tax revenues are higher than expected and the deficit is £30 billion lower than planned. If we look at the OBR report that came out today, we see that VAT has gone up by £21.7 billion—that is £21.7 billion extra in the Chancellor’s coffers—and that the amount from self-assessment is up by £5.2 billion more than was forecast late last year. That could have been used to cushion the cost of living crisis and to invest in renewables and wean us off fossil fuel.

Money Saving Expert’s Martin Lewis was stark in his warning on Sunday morning:

“As the ‘Money Saving Expert’ who has been known for this, I am virtually out of tools to help people now.”

He said, while watching this statement, that his “head ...sunk”. There is no help for people on energy.

In conclusion, people face a crisis that the Chancellor could have done more to avert. In so many ways, he has made the choice not to act. There is nothing for Scotland in his announcement today. We on the Scottish National party Benches look forward to the day when Scotland has a Government with the full fiscal powers to make sure that all our people can have a decent standard of living, and that no child goes to bed with an empty tummy in a cold home.

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady said that there is nothing for Scotland in this statement, but maybe she missed the part about the UK-wide fuel duty cut, which, together

with the freeze, will save a typical driver £100 and a typical van driver £200 this year. Perhaps she missed the part about the largest increase to personal tax thresholds ever. That £6 billion tax cut will help 2.4 million people in Scotland, starting in just a few months' time. Indeed, 75,000 businesses will benefit from the employment allowance—again, that £1,000 tax cut for Scottish businesses will come in very shortly.

The hon. Lady mentioned that Scotland, as ever, wants more fiscal autonomy. Scotland already has a considerable degree of fiscal autonomy, and I did not hear whether the SNP will deliver the same income tax cut for Scottish taxpayers that the UK Government will deliver—as paid for in these numbers—in 2024. I look forward to hearing from her that the Scottish Government will cut taxes for their taxpayers with the powers and funding that they will get.

I always want to make sure that we look after the most vulnerable in our society. The hon. Lady mentioned a single mother she knew. I am pleased with and proud, in fact, of this Government's actions, because by increasing the national living wage in April by 6.6%, by cutting the UC taper rate and through the increase in personal thresholds today, we have ensured—if we take all tax and welfare changes together—that a single mother of two children working full time on the national living wage will now be £1,600 better off.

The hon. Lady made a point about businesses. We are providing a business rate discount for business, and Scotland has received a Barnett share of that money. A business rate discount will come in here for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in just a few weeks, and I know that the Scottish Government will have the resources to do the same thing.

Lastly, the hon. Lady made a comment about prepayment meters. I am acutely aware that millions of families rely on prepayment meters. That is why, when we designed the energy support package that we announced in February, we had particular care for those people to ensure that they would receive the same benefit. Indeed, we made sure that 40% of them will automatically get the £200 rebate in October. For the remainder, we are working with BEIS and the industry to ensure that all those people get the same benefit as well. They will receive a voucher, a cheque in the post or something called a “special access message” on their phone, by SMS, so that when they go to one of the retailers that they use to top up their meter, they will also benefit from our actions, because this Conservative Government is on the side of everyone.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Treasury Committee, Mel Stride.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): I broadly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Of course, the devil will always be in the detail and we look forward to seeing him at the Treasury Committee next week, along with the OBR and various economists, including from the IFS, which he mentioned.

I welcome the cut to fuel duty. That will help motorists and consumers and be important for businesses. The VAT reduction relating to energy efficiency and solar is very important in the context of the sanctions on Russia and energy self-sufficiency, where we can achieve it. The hardship fund will be a very targeted measure, which is important, and small businesses will be delighted to

have heard about the increase in the employment allowance to £5,000, which was a key ask of the Federation of Small Businesses.

Along with many others in the House, I would have liked the NI increases for next year to have been scrapped in their entirety. However, the threshold increase that my right hon. Friend announced today has been very significant—far more significant than I imagined it would be.

This is the big question that my right hon. Friend will be asked: in the context of the fiscal targets, which I think we all agree that we need to meet, has he used enough of the headroom now as opposed to having that as a hedge against future uncertainties, to which he alluded and which are very real, in terms of inflation, interest rates and the effect on the cost of Government borrowing? Will he say a bit more about the fiscal headroom—he will have had the advantage of seeing the OBR figures, which I have not—and his assessment of that, particularly around the deficit target?

On growth, my right hon. Friend pointed out the OBR downgrades, which are not surprising in a high inflationary environment, and the dampening effect that they will have on consumer demand. I was very pleased that he referred to his Mais lecture, because it will be essential for us to focus on innovation, people and driving up capital investment.

My right hon. Friend referred, I think, to a consultation on how to improve capital investment, on which we lag behind our G7 competitors. Will he tell us more about the timeline for that consultation and when he expects to be able to provide important certainty for businesses in that respect?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my right hon. Friend for his words of support. Let me briefly address his two substantive questions.

The tax plan published in the spring statement document today has a range of options for cutting taxes on investment. I look forward to having a conversation with my right hon. Friend, with colleagues and with the business community about the right way to achieve the outcomes that we want. The final decisions will be announced in the autumn Budget and will take effect in spring 2023 after the super deduction ends; I will not get into the detail now.

We have about 1% of GDP as headroom against both the stock and the flow rules on debt falling and on borrowing. On the borrowing side, that is approximately in line with previous Chancellors. On the stock rule, it is a bit less: the average over the past decade has been about 1.7%. The headroom includes the tax cut in 2024, which has been fully paid for and costed in these numbers. I believe that we are taking a responsible and pragmatic approach, but my right hon. Friend is right to point out the risks. The OBR has said that relatively small changes in the macroeconomic outlook could wipe out the entire headroom. That is why it is right that we continue to be disciplined on public spending.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I would like to try to get everybody in. That will mean Members not making short statements, but asking just one question so that the Chancellor can give one answer.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): At Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister batted away a question about fraud during covid by suggesting that it was just about delivery, but it was the Chancellor who gave the ministerial direction for the bounce back loans to be paid at such speed. With a check that was even 48 hours longer, the Government might have avoided the fraudulent duplicate claims that were not stopped until a month later. The £4.7 billion that was lost to fraud could have mitigated measures such as the national insurance increase. Does the Chancellor now regret that he did not pause for thought and that he was not more cautious about fraud?

Rishi Sunak: I have a lot of respect for the hon. Lady, but on this matter I believe she is wrong. She has incredible hindsight to point out now issues that neither she nor anybody else raised at the time. Quite the opposite, in fact: I was told daily in this Chamber to get money out not in weeks and months, but in hours and days. Putting longer fraud checks in place would have taken weeks, so I stand by the decision that we made.

We have put various safeguards in place. We have blocked £2 billion of bounce back loans—60,000 because of the checks at Companies House. The National Investigation Service and the National Crime Agency are in the process of successfully prosecuting dozens of people. We are striking people off from Companies House and we are investing more today in the NCA, NATIS and the British Business Bank so that they can work on the interventions that we know are doing very well. I think it is wrong for hon. Members to pretend now that they wanted to do something at the time, when they did not.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on a tax-cutting, deficit-cutting, tax-simplifying statement that is very much in the tradition of Nigel Lawson. He mentioned research and development tax credits. Are we on track for our target for investment in R&D across the economy to reach 2.4% of GDP by 2027? When will the changes to R&D tax credits come into effect so that further progress can be made?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my right hon. Friend for his support; I know that this is an area of particular interest and concern for him. The 2.4% comprises two things: what the Government spend and what private businesses spend. I can reassure him that we are more than on track for the Government bit of it: we already spend the OECD average on the 2.4%, and that spending will go up by 50% over this Parliament, so the Government are doing our bit. As I said in my statement and in the Mais lecture, the private sector lags significantly internationally in how much it spends.

The changes that we are making to R&D will all come into effect in the spring next year and will be announced finally in the autumn Budget. My right hon. Friend wrote the foreword to a very helpful report on this topic. I look forward to working with him, with his Committee—the Select Committee on Science and Technology—and with others so that we get these changes right and drive up private sector investment in R&D.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): May I draw attention to two stories in the *Sheffield Star* today? Sheffield is still a city of steel. Ben McIvor, president of Forged Solutions Group, which employs

400 skilled workers in the steel industry, is begging for help with the rise in energy costs, because the company simply cannot pass on those costs to its customers. Workers at Liberty Steel are protesting about the Prime Minister's broken promise that if we left the EU, he would cut energy bills for steel companies. Why has the Chancellor chosen to break the Prime Minister's promise?

Rishi Sunak: No, we have provided over £2 billion-worth of support for energy-intensive industries over the past several years—including, I believe, over £600 million for the steel industry. That support comes in a variety of ways, including free allowances and compensation for the emissions trading scheme and other carbon price mechanisms. We also announced hundreds of millions of pounds in the spending review to support the industry to make the transition to using cleaner energy.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): In the spending review, the Chancellor gave a lifeline to maintained nursery schools by confirming supplementary funding, but not all schools qualify for that funding. May I appeal to him to work with the Secretary of State for Education to identify the modest additional funding needed to put all maintained nursery schools on a stable financial footing for the future?

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend has championed the issue consistently since I have had this job, and she deserves enormous credit. I would be very happy to talk to her and to take her proposals up with the Department for Education.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): It would be churlish not to accept that the Chancellor has sought to deal with many of the issues that working families today face, but given the windfall in taxes that he has experienced, I believe that more could have been done to help with fuel costs, energy bills and other cost of living increases. It is significant that the Chancellor could not apply all his tax cuts to Northern Ireland because of the Northern Ireland protocol: that shows that the protocol needs to be dealt with.

At the start of his statement, the Chancellor referred to Ukraine, but surprisingly there was no mention of additional resources for defence—for the defence of this country, the defence of democracy and the defence of values in the face of Putin's aggression. Why was that absent today?

Rishi Sunak: On fiscal windfalls and headroom, I refer the right hon. Gentleman to my answer to the Chair of the Treasury Committee. Our headrooms are relatively small by historical standards and could be wiped out very easily by small changes in the macroeconomic outlook, so I think that it is wrong to say that there is a huge windfall. Indeed, borrowing for the forthcoming year will be higher than was forecast in October.

On defence, I refer the right hon. Gentleman to my answer to the shadow Chancellor. We increased the defence budget by £24 billion in 2020—the largest increase since the cold war. The Ministry of Defence was the only Department that got a four-year settlement when all the others got just one year. That is how seriously we take the issue.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on the statement and particularly on the 5p reduction in fuel duty, which I note is temporary. Will he remind all Members of this House that temporary does not mean permanent, and that as the reduction costs £5 billion, if it becomes permanent we will not be able to reduce income tax, which also costs £5 billion, if we are to meet our tests of fiscal responsibility?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend, as ever, for his support. He is right: the fuel duty cut will benefit all our constituents, particularly those in more rural areas and on lower incomes. He is also right to make the point that we need to remain disciplined on public spending. We have fully accounted for the income tax cut in our plans, but it will require collective discipline to deliver those tax cuts and others that we want to see over the remainder of this Parliament.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Government have been warned privately and publicly not to make up employment statistics, so alarm bells rang when the Chancellor of the Exchequer glossed over the employment numbers in his statement just now. The small print reveals that unemployment is forecast to rise next year and then plateau, so may I ask him what the Department for Work and Pensions is playing at?

Rishi Sunak: Unemployment is at an almost record low level of 3.9% at the moment. The OBR's forecasts overall are lower than its October forecasts and are still at very low levels of 4.2%-ish throughout the forecast period. We are very proud of this Government's track record on jobs, with record numbers of people on the payroll. Despite the forecasts of millions of people unemployed, we have managed to successfully get everyone back to work, with a record number of job vacancies, and we will continue to focus on that.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): With the world economy facing unparalleled challenges from at least two of the four horsemen of the apocalypse—death from plague and war—and with all the challenges that the Chancellor faces, I wonder whether anybody seriously believes, after a decade of unfunded spending promises, that tax would be any lower under a Labour Government. That is a question that I think the Labour party should answer.

May I ask a question on behalf of people of pensionable age? More and more of them are having to wait a long time—up to two years—for so-called minor operations, which can be very debilitating and very painful. More and more people on middle incomes are dipping into their savings or going into debt to pay for private operations. Will the Chancellor keep an open mind about helping those people with some sort of tax relief—if not on insurance, on the cost of operations that are delayed for up to two years?

Rishi Sunak: I am always happy to take suggestions from my right hon. Friend. He has identified a pressing problem faced by all our constituents who are waiting longer than we would like for elective treatment in particular. Every penny of our new health and care levy will go to the NHS and social care so we can make a start on that backlog. We are backing the NHS to help it to reduce its backlogs, and my right hon. Friend is right to raise this issue.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Households are facing the biggest hit to living standards on record, and they were looking to the Chancellor today to offer them some hope. We know from the OBR forecast that the Treasury will take an additional £13 billion in VAT thanks to inflation. Will the Chancellor tell us why he has not announced the emergency cut that the Liberal Democrats have called for, which would put £600 back into the pockets of the average family? VAT is an unfair tax that puts up prices for every single family in the UK, and makes up half of all the taxes paid by the poorest households compared with less than a fifth of those paid by the richest.

Rishi Sunak: I think it wrong to suggest that there has been a VAT windfall. If the hon. Lady looks at the numbers in the OBR forecast, she will see that its projection for VAT receipts in the forthcoming year is lower than its previous projection in October. We are helping working families, with a £6 billion tax cut which will put £330 into the pockets of 30 million workers across the United Kingdom.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I think that when my right hon. Friend gets back to his office, that portrait of Nigel Lawson will be looking down at him admiringly. This is a Conservative plan that we can all get behind. It rewards work, it gets the deficit down, and it incentivises investment from businesses rather than penalising them with windfall taxes.

As my right hon. Friend knows, energy prices are very volatile, so he is right to stand by the £9 billion package that he introduced previously and wait until the next update on the energy price cap in the late summer. If it does indeed show that energy prices are going to rise substantially, that will have a big impact on the poorest households. Will my right hon. Friend assure us that he will keep this matter under review, and will consider further measures if necessary to protect those households?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my right hon. Friend for his warm words of support, and I can reassure him that we keep everything under review. We have stood by the British people over the past few years, and we will continue to stand by them. It is thanks to the responsible decisions of this Government that we are able to provide the support that is required when the times call for it.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Consumer spending is vital to the growth of our economy in the aftermath of the pandemic, but with inflation at its highest level for 30 years—the Chancellor has seen the data—consumer confidence is declining, hitting our small businesses hard and setting back their recovery from the pandemic. Why on earth is the Chancellor not fully U-turning on his rise in national insurance contributions at this time—a rise that the Government themselves have admitted will increase inflation and decrease spending power?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady may not realise that for 70% of people, this is more generous than doing what she suggests. Those people will pay less tax as a result of this policy as opposed to the one that she advocates, and I believe that it is the right policy. We are on the side of hard-working people, and this will help them at a time when they need that help.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I thank the Chancellor for his statement, which has been warmly welcomed by the people and businesses of Wimbledon, and commend him for his analysis of some of the challenges to the economy. One measure that he could move from temporary to permanent is the super deduction, so will he consider that as part of his consultation? I think it is already evident that this would be the most effective way of changing behaviour and securing greater R&D and capital expenditure.

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said, and look forward to discussing those topics with him over the coming months. The document outlines a range of options for cutting taxes on investment. Hopefully he will have a chance to digest those, and I look forward to discussing them with him.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Conservative party introduced universal credit, but instead of uprating it in line with current inflation, the Chancellor has chosen to increase the size of the household support fund. Those who have heard of it have to go to their local councils to receive it. What evidence, if any, does the Chancellor have that the fund is effective in delivering help to the families who need help most?

Rishi Sunak: The feedback that I receive from colleagues suggests that it has been effective, and I trust councils to know who are the people in their areas who most need our help. I used to be a local government Minister, and, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, I have enormous respect and regard for local authorities. However, we did not just do that: in the autumn Budget, we gave a £2 billion cut through the tax rate on universal credit to nearly 2 million people on the lowest incomes.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend heartily for the cut in fuel duty, and for waiving the national insurance threshold. I hope I can now retire from campaigning on that issue; it would make my life a lot easier! My right hon. Friend has stood up for workers and for people on low incomes, and we should not forget that. As he said, it is this party that is the true workers' party of the United Kingdom.

When my right hon. Friend considers a reform of the apprenticeship levy, will he ensure that at its heart is a focus on enabling more disadvantaged young people to take up apprenticeships, including degree apprenticeships?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my right hon. Friend for his support, and I can give him that reassurance. Apprenticeships are fantastic and we want to ensure that they are continually supported, but we will look at all aspects of this to ensure that we also provide incentives for the training that we want to see. My right hon. Friend is right to emphasise that this is the party of the workers, and that is in no small part thanks to his campaigning. I congratulate him on making the case so well.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is clear from the Chancellor's statement that he wanted the buzzword to be security, but one of the issues that did not appear in the statement was food insecurity. Given that 60% of Glaswegians do not possess a car and many of my constituents do not own their homes to put solar panels

on them, what does the Chancellor say to the people whose children will go to bed hungry tonight, and why was there no mention of that in his statement?

Rishi Sunak: We have already created the holiday activity and food programme, which provides both food and enriching activities for children outside term time. There is also the household support fund, and Barnett consequential will enable the Scottish Government to provide the same support for vulnerable families in their communities.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I warmly welcome the Chancellor's statement and, in particular, the rise in the national insurance threshold. It will not only help low earners, which is important, but bring a welcome simplicity to the system. I also welcome the reform of the apprenticeship levy, but will the Chancellor look at the amount that can be transferred through the annual levy transfer? It is currently capped for larger organisations, and that restricts the amount that they can give to smaller organisations. A reform would see much better use of the apprenticeship levy, which would help small and medium-sized enterprises, local authorities and others.

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for his support. He is right to point out that the significant increase in personal tax thresholds is particularly well targeted at those on lower and middle incomes, and I look forward to discussing with him, over the coming months, potential reforms in the way in which we tax training and apprenticeships.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I have just received a message from Michael, who is a carer for his disabled wife in Hull. He says:

"So no help for the disabled. I guess I'll have to put my wife into hospital next winter so she can stay warm".

What would the Chancellor say to Michael, who does not drive a car and is not planning to install solar panels on his rented home?

Rishi Sunak: Obviously it is hard for me to comment on individual circumstances, but in general I am proud of this Government's support for those who are disabled. We have spent some £58 billion on disability welfare. When I last checked the figures, the OECD ranked us higher than many other countries, including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany and Austria, so we are generous and compassionate in our support for those who are disabled.

We are taking a range of measures, not least spending £1 billion to help people with disabilities into work and providing £1.5 billion for the disabled facilities grant to improve the conditions of their homes. Today we announced a small amount of extra funding to improve the provision of Changing Places toilets across the country, an issue about which I care passionately. That funding will increase their number by 40%, so that the quarter of a million people with complex disabilities who need access to such facilities will now find one closer to where they need it.

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): I thank the Chancellor for what I thought was an excellent spring statement, and look forward to seeing how it will benefit my constituents. I was particularly pleased to hear about

the cut in fuel duty. However, I was a bit disappointed not to hear anything specific about an increase in funding for mental health. Is that something that the Chancellor will consider in the future?

Rishi Sunak: I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that we announced a significant increase for the NHS back at the spending review in the autumn, with a record NHS spending settlement including big increases for mental health. The Department of Health and Social Care will be able to provide him with the exact split, but he can rest assured that we are making good progress with dedicated funding for the cause that he rightly champions.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Let us be absolutely clear that benefits and pensions are going to rise by 3.1% while inflation is predicted to be between 7% and 10%. That is a cut for some of the poorest in our society. I want to make this specific appeal to the Chancellor. The people I am desperately worried about in my constituency are those who are forced to live on benefit, largely through disability or ill health, and the poorer pensioners. We know that energy prices are rising rapidly, and that the assistance provided so far will not enable them to cope. When we get to November, those people will be freezing in their own homes and lives will be put at risk. One simple solution is to double the winter fuel allowance. Can I appeal to him to go away, think about that and come back sooner rather than later to give vulnerable people some confidence in the future?

Rishi Sunak: All the people the right hon. Gentleman mentioned will benefit from the proposals we put forward last month, with £9 million to help everybody. The doubling in size of the household support fund is there for his local council and others to use to support those most in need, and he is right to highlight the winter fuel payments, which are payments of up to £300 for those pensioners. Many of those on pension credit will also have access to the warm home discount, which is an extra £150.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): As a member of the Treasury Committee and chair of the Conservative Back-Bench Treasury committee, I congratulate the Chancellor on this spring statement's tax cutting and tax simplifying, with many measures to help hard-working families make ends meet and to promote economic growth. I also very much welcome the publication of the tax plan. Too often, Governments are tactical about their tax policies, leaving great uncertainty for businesses about what will happen next. We now have a strategy for the years ahead. Tax policy must be informed by a strategy; it also needs to be credible and fair. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that, in all the measures the Treasury has introduced since 2019, it is the poorest households that have benefited the most and the wealthiest that have contributed the most?

Rishi Sunak: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his new appointment and look forward to working with him in both his committees over the coming months, particularly to flesh out the business tax options that we want to finalise by the autumn Budget. He is right to say that the distribution analysis published today, which

looks at all tax, welfare and spending decisions, shows that this Government have been highly progressive in their actions and that those on the lowest incomes have benefited the most.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Once again, quite incredibly, there is a climate-shaped hole at the heart of this statement. Once again, the Chancellor did not even mention the word "climate". That is all the more unforgivable as the measures we need to tackle the climate crisis and those we need to tackle the cost of living crisis are the same. With 6 million people now facing fuel poverty, where is the home retrofit revolution and the investment that we need to make 19 million homes warmer by 2030, saving families £400 on their bills and creating hundreds of thousands of jobs in the process? How many more people will have to freeze in their homes before he will act?

Rishi Sunak: We already acted in the spending review last autumn to outline billions of pounds to improve the energy efficiency of hundreds of thousands of homes across the country. The hon. Lady is right to say that that saves £300. We have grants available of up to £20,000, depending on the scheme, that will do that over the remainder of this Parliament. Also, the energy company obligation does the same thing for hundreds of thousands of people in fuel poverty through their energy bills. So we already did it; we are getting on with it. And I think she missed the fact we have just cut VAT today on energy-saving materials.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome the statement from the Chancellor today, and in particular the way in which the most support is being provided to those who will need it most. Can I ask specifically about the section on the research and development review? Much of our economy is going digital and we are seeing an increasing focus on the knowledge economy and the creative sectors. Will that be at the core of his investment plans for the future, since that is how we will secure future growth?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend, as ever, makes a thoughtful point. Innovation, broadly defined, along with multi-factor productivity, accounts for about half our productivity growth. The pace has slowed recently and we need to reinvigorate it. I set out a strategy to do that at the Mais lecture, and key to that will be driving up private sector investment in R&D and innovation. The tax cuts and reforms we will put in place in the autumn will help us to achieve that end.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Can the Chancellor confirm that someone in employment who is on universal credit will see an increase in the taper between £9,500 and £12,500—a £1,290 clawback to the Chancellor? What is he doing to address that issue, which will involve the poorest workers in the country facing a £1,290 increase in their taxes?

Rishi Sunak: I think the hon. Gentleman is describing how the taper works. It withdraws benefits as people's incomes rise. That is how the system is designed. However, I can tell him that, because we took action to cut the universal credit taper rate last autumn, we delivered a tax cut of £2 billion for almost 2 million people. I gave

[*Rishi Sunak*]

the example earlier of a single mother with two children who is renting and working full time on the national living wage. As a result of all our tax, welfare and wage changes, that person will be £1,600 better off.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his statement, as far as it went. He is right to say that he cannot print more money, borrow more money or spend more money. Can I ask him to bring forward the tax cuts, particularly for the lower earners, because as he rightly says, they spend their money far more wisely than the Government do? That will put more cash in their pockets to meet the increasing bills.

Rishi Sunak: That is exactly what we are doing. The increase in the personal tax threshold in July was brought in far quicker than these things normally are, but we wanted to do it as quickly as possible. This will put £330 in the pockets of 30 million people up and down the country.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): This year, the Chancellor is delivering the largest fall in living standards since Office for National Statistics records began in 1956-57. Will he tell us how many more people will fall into poverty as a result of his failure to ensure that increases in social security match inflation?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady is describing the impact of inflation on people's incomes. Of course that will have an impact; we have been very clear and honest about that. That is not just happening here; it is happening everywhere across the world as we grapple with higher inflation, but the measures we are taking today will make a significant difference to support working families in weathering some of the challenges ahead. Again, for those who are most vulnerable, we started this journey in autumn with a tax cut to universal credit, and we are doubling the household support fund today to £1 billion.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I welcome the Chancellor's statement today. It will do a lot to help many of my constituents in Rushcliffe. Can he reassure me and my constituents that the tax-cutting measures announced today will continue to be the focus of this Conservative Government and that they are just the start of what is possible if we continue to build a stronger, greener economy?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We started in October, and we have made progress today. The tax plan published today shows that we will continue to make progress, cutting taxes for businesses and people over the remainder of this Parliament.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Chancellor is of course the Conservative and Unionist Chancellor for all of the United Kingdom, but is it not a fact that because of the deficiencies in the Northern Ireland protocol, none of his flagship programmes will apply to Northern Ireland until he goes cap in hand to the European Community and seeks its permission to apply these VAT differentials to Northern Ireland? If the European Community says no, what is the Conservative and Unionist Chancellor going to do for our part of the United Kingdom?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I have specifically highlighted the deficiencies of the protocol. I look forward to having those discussions with the Commission. Obviously these are not particularly traded goods, because they are installed, so there ought to be a strong argument that they are included, particularly as we are all now collectively grappling with an energy crisis. However, I do not want to pre-empt the Foreign Secretary's conversations on the protocol. It is not right to say that the flagship policies do not apply to Northern Ireland. The increase in the personal tax thresholds, the income tax cut and the fuel duty cut will apply to Northern Ireland, and I know that they will benefit his constituents and millions of others across Northern Ireland.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I welcome the announcements that my right hon. Friend has made about national insurance thresholds, fuel duty and the increase in the household support fund. The past two years have been very challenging for the poorest and most vulnerable, and it is going to get a whole lot tougher. As we saw with his swift and right decision to raise universal credit at the start of the pandemic—this was too hastily reduced—the best way of targeting support for those who need it is through the benefits system. May I urge him to look closely in the coming days and weeks at the levels of UC and other benefits, and the means of uprating them?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I strongly believe that the best way to help people sustainably is to move them off welfare and into work. That is what this Government are doing. Our record on doing so is incredibly strong, and we are throwing the kitchen sink, in terms of both money and policies, which the International Monetary Fund has described as “well targeted”, at supporting people as they make that transition and putting more money in their pockets.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The Chancellor really has not helped those in greatest need. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that the current uprating of working-age social security benefits will mean 400,000 people falling into poverty this year. With inflation now forecast to average about 8% in 2023, will he reflect on the very different circumstances the country finds itself in and uprate benefits by the inflation rate forecast in the OBR's economic and fiscal outlook?

Rishi Sunak: The way that benefits and indeed pensions are uprated is the same every year, and it has been done in the same way for more than a decade. We are making sure that we support people from welfare into work, which is the most sustainable way to help them. Someone moving from UC into full-time work at the national living wage is £6,000 better off. That is why I am pleased that because of our management of the economy there are now record numbers of job vacancies and the support to help people get those jobs.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Thousands of people across my constituency will welcome the targeted measures announced by the Chancellor today. Will he reconfirm for the House that he agrees that the best way to tackle the cost of living issues that people face is through the dignity of a job and the security of a regular pay cheque? That is why it is so important that unemployment—[*Interruption.*] I ask

Opposition Members to listen. It is why it is so important that unemployment has fallen every month for the past year, and they should welcome that.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and puts the point eloquently: the best way to help people is to get them into work. That is why we are creating record numbers of jobs and then making sure that not only are those jobs well paid, but people keep more of the money they earn. That is the approach of this Conservative Government.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): There appears to be no plan from the Chancellor, glossy or otherwise, for farming and food security. Is he aware that hundreds and hundreds of farmers are leaving the industry because of the botching of the transition from the old basic payment scheme to the new system? If he were to peg the basic payment scheme at its current rate, rather than halving it over the next two years, he would at least give time for farmers to be able to catch up and get into the new schemes. As it stands, farmers are leaving the industry just at the moment when we are facing an international food security crisis. Will he rethink and back British farmers?

Rishi Sunak: As the hon. Gentleman knows well, given that we are constituency neighbours, I also represent plenty of farmers and I listen to their concerns. The Agriculture Secretary is doing an excellent job of transitioning from the old system to the new. The overall funding for farming has been protected by this Government and the same level of funding is available, as we promised it would be. I want to see more British food grown here and to see us supporting British food—of course I do, and I think the British public will as well.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The shadow Chancellor quoted Money Saving Expert Martin Lewis's comments from before the spring statement, but since the statement he has written:

"That £3,000 rise of threshold to £12,570 is a gain of £330 a year and more than offsets the...rise for many on lower incomes. Good call."

Just what proportion of workers will now be getting more money from the higher threshold than they pay in the health and social care levy?

Rishi Sunak: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for sharing that helpful tweet with the House, but I would say to him that the number he is looking for is 70%—70% of workers will pay less because of the increase in thresholds, even taking into account the new levy. That is why this Government are on the side of hard-working British taxpayers.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I do not think the Chancellor understands the depth of despair and fear among the very lowest-income households in this country, for example, those whose incomes were already below the thresholds for national insurance or tax—those who have to rely on social security benefits as they are not able to work because of caring responsibilities, health or disability. To uprate benefits by less than half the rate of inflation at the same time as families face particular pressures on paying for the basics of energy and food will simply leave those families

destitute. Will he please heed the calls from around the House this afternoon and look again at his benefits uprating policy?

Rishi Sunak: As I have said, for those who are most vulnerable we are providing an extra half a billion pounds, and we are doubling the size of the household fund—local authorities are best placed to direct that funding. But we do want to support people into work, which is why I am proud of the record we have.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I warmly welcome the tax cuts announced today, especially with the focus on low and middle earners. I note that the OBR has said today that interest payments on debt will quadruple next year. Does my right hon. Friend agree that with interest payments on our debt at £80 billion we need to maintain discipline on spending going forward?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. She is absolutely right; the increase in debt payments is historic and it gives a glimpse of some of the risks facing us going forward. That is why it is right that we maintain headroom against our fiscal rules, and the best way to do that, in order to deliver a lower-tax economy, is to remain very disciplined on further public spending.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): The Chancellor has detailed a small number of fiscal interventions and they will be a small mercy for the poorest in our society. May I ask his advice on what families with a child suffering from a life-shortening condition will receive as a result of his measures today? Children suffering from life-limiting conditions are often at home, where they need to be kept warm 24 hours a day, seven days a week, often with specialist equipment running. The Children's Hospices Across Scotland charity is receiving alarming calls from people whose energy bill estimates are going up in the region of £268 to £720 a month. What hope for them, Chancellor?

Rishi Sunak: In the autumn spending review we announced record funding settlements, not just for health, but across the board. That resulted in Barnett consequentials of, if I recall it correctly, about £4.5 billion annually for the Scottish Government. Obviously, they can use that to support their local communities in the way that they feel is best. Again, there have been further Barnetts today as a result of the household support fund.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): With a 5p cut in fuel duty, the lifting of the national insurance threshold and a plan to cut income tax, will my right hon. Friend reiterate that this Government are a tax-cutting Government? On the Government side of the House, we trust people on how best to spend their own money.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and he is absolutely right: we want people to be able to keep more of their own money. The tax plan announced today represents the biggest net cut to personal taxes in a quarter of a century, proving that we very much are on the side of hard-working British people.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Many of my constituents are having to choose between putting food on the table or heating their homes. At my local food bank last week, staff told me that they were facing

[Ellie Reeves]

levels of demand that they had never seen before. Meanwhile, the boss of BP's salary has increased to almost £4.5 million. Surely the Chancellor must see that it is time for a windfall tax on oil and gas, to tackle rising energy bills.

Rishi Sunak: I have already addressed this and I urge the hon. Lady to wait for the Prime Minister's forthcoming energy security strategy, which will ensure that British people have affordable, secure and reliable energy and, most importantly, in the process will support British jobs and British investment.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I welcome this statement and I agree with the Chancellor that this is a statement for the Union, because in these uncertain and unusual times it is the strength of our economy that helps us in positions on defence, trade and more. We are maintaining generous levels of support for devolved Administrations, in Scotland, in Wales and in parts of England. So it is vital that UK taxpayers can be assured that they are receiving value for money for expenditure behind devolved curtains. Will the new Cabinet Efficiency and Value for Money Committee be paying attention to that?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I look forward to taking up his suggestion and having further conversations with him about it. I am glad that over 1 million Welsh taxpayers will benefit from the announcements we made today.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): The richest Member of Parliament just spoke about how he understands the impact that the cost of living crisis is having on millions of people, but what he said will sound like a cruel joke to people across the country. Energy bills are rocketing, while fossil fuel giants BP and Shell are set to make £40 billion in profits this year. Why has the Chancellor refused to introduce a windfall tax on those companies to fund the restoration of the old, lower, energy cap? Is it because he would rather squeeze the livelihoods of ordinary people than the profits of the super-rich?

Rishi Sunak: With regards to the livelihoods of ordinary people, they have just received a £330 tax cut today and a discount on their fuel bill, with more tax cuts to come. This Government are on the side of hard-working British families.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): I want to ask about the national insurance threshold change—the one that Martin Lewis described as “the big one”. Can my right hon. tax-cutting Friend confirm that this will result in an actual tax cut for more than 30 million people—in fact, for anyone who earns less than £35,000?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is absolutely right, and I thank him for his support. This change will put £330 in the pockets of 30 million hard-working British families, including many in Stockton South, and it means that 70% of workers will be better off, even accounting for the new health and care levy.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): In his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) on steel, the Chancellor talked a lot about the steel compensation that has been paid. While that is, of course, welcome, the fact is that British steelmakers are still paying 61% more than their German competitors. Steel is a foundational industry that is about good jobs, decarbonisation and our sovereign capability, so why is there absolutely nothing in the statement for our steel industry?

Rishi Sunak: We have programmes in place to support our energy-intensive industries, and we remain in close dialogue with all companies in all sectors. Our track record on supporting industry is strong, and we continue to create jobs and make sure that British workers are well supported.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I welcome the Chancellor's announcements today, which will help people across Old Bexley and Sidcup with the cost of living, and support local businesses as our local economy recovers. However, in stark contrast to these announcements, people in outer London areas such as Bexley are facing an eye-watering 8.8% increase in the Labour Mayor of London's council tax precept, which we continue to see little benefit from. Even worse, drivers and local businesses face the prospect of paying more than £4,000 a year as a result of the ultra low emission zone expansion. That is clearly a tax raid that will have little proven environmental impact on outer London. Does he agree that this tax raid by Sadiq Khan on hard-working people across Bexley should be stopped?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Even if the Labour Mayor of London is not standing up for his constituents, I know my hon. Friend will stand up for his hard-working constituents in Old Bexley and Sidcup. He will have seen today that we are on their side; we are cutting their taxes.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Chancellor is still not agreeing to a windfall tax on the super profits of the oil and gas giants. Such a tax would hit the shareholders, not workers and their jobs. It would not hamper business from operating successfully. Why is he protecting wealthy shareholders?

Rishi Sunak: I fear this is getting a little repetitive. I believe that we will see more investment in British industry, more investment in the North sea, more energy security and more jobs created. I look forward to companies bringing forward their plans for that in the coming weeks and months.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I am old enough to remember when levelling up was the centrepiece of the Government's domestic policy. People will be incredulous that we did not hear a single mention of it from the Chancellor this afternoon. He talks of low growth; we have low growth because we are not unleashing the potential of the regions of this country. It is time for the Chancellor to just admit that levelling up is a sham.

Rishi Sunak: The White Paper from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities was in fact warmly welcomed by many colleagues from across the House. More broadly, it is backed up with

tens, if not hundreds, of billions of pounds of extra funding. The results are seen in our employment growth, which has been strongest in those regions outside London and the south-east.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor confirmed a business rate discount for businesses up and down the country, to a rateable value of £110,000. A number of businesses in my constituency do not qualify for that. A number of businesses across London did not get any benefit during the pandemic. One of the key ways that the Chancellor could help many businesses—not just those in Vauxhall—is through VAT cuts for tourism. People are not coming back to the tourism sector; we have seen record low numbers. Does the Chancellor agree that a permanent cut to 12.5% will help those businesses get back on their feet?

Rishi Sunak: All statistics show that the hospitality industry is recovering very well: cash balances are healthy, and business insolvencies are down. That is in part thanks to the support that we have put behind that industry. The uncapped business rate discount will provide support to hundreds of thousands of businesses. It is right that we target support at those who need our help most, whether they are businesses or families and individuals.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is the humanitarian funding that the Chancellor announced for Ukraine in addition to aid flows already planned within the 0.5% budget, or will it squeeze planned expenditure elsewhere in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office?

Rishi Sunak: All official development assistance announcements are handled by the Foreign Secretary. Within the overall budget, there is always contingency, and space annually for responses to humanitarian disasters that cannot be foreseen. It is not a question of squeezing other things out at all; this is part of planned spend.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I commend the Government's action on Russian sanctions, but we cannot possibly think that this is "job done." Mariupol still burns; children are fleeing the bombing of their home. We still have not even introduced a sanction regime that is as tough as the sanction regime on Iran. Can I urge the Chancellor to go a bit further? We need to sanction all the Russian banks, not just 60% of them. We need to tackle the trust funds, such as that recently set up by Alisher Usmanov to protect his assets in the UK. We need to tackle the families and the hangers-on, such as Lavrov's family, who are in the UK, and we need to tackle shipping. We must do all these things for the people of Ukraine as fast as possible.

Rishi Sunak: I have been working very closely with my counterparts in G7 economies and beyond to co-ordinate our financial and economic sanctions, which I am more responsible for. I am highly confident that what we have done is world-leading, particularly with regards to acts on bank freezes. We are constantly in dialogue with our partners to make sure the action we take is effective when it is co-ordinated.

Chris Bryant: Why do you do that? It is shameful when you do that.

Rishi Sunak: No, it is not remotely, actually. There has been good unity in the House on this topic. The hon. Gentleman claims that somehow we are behind other countries when it comes to sanctioning Russian banks; it is simply not true. This Government are taking a leading role in this. We are ahead of most of our peers. He does not know, but I know, because I am in the conversations with Finance Ministers about where else they are prepared to go. I am very confident that we have done a lot and have played a leading role internationally in bringing others along with us.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): We have heard the Chancellor try to excuse his failure to increase benefits in line with inflation. He has referred to the universal credit taper and the national living wage, which help those people on benefits who are in work. However, does he recognise that the majority of people on benefits in the UK are not in work, and there is nothing in this budget to help them?

Rishi Sunak: I think the hon. Gentleman missed the household support fund announcement, which is specifically for local councils, so that they can help those who are most vulnerable. Many of those people who are not currently in work can, with the right support, care and attention, be supported into work. That is something that this Government are spending a lot on doing.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Today, the Welsh Government announced a £500 payment to unpaid family carers, to recognise their commitment during the pandemic. Unpaid carers in Scotland receive the carer's allowance supplement. Meanwhile, carers in England get a miserly carer's allowance, which is increasing by only £2 this year. That means not only that the sacrifice and commitment of unpaid carers in England is going unrewarded, but that carers are being driven further into financial hardship. How many more need to be pushed into poverty before this Government act to value carers, and give them the targeted support they deserve?

Rishi Sunak: We do value carers. There are fewer people in poverty today than when we first came into office—1.7 million people fewer in absolute poverty than in 2010, after housing costs. Also, today we have topped up the household support fund, in order to provide support to the most vulnerable who need help.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): This week it was revealed that 75% of people in my constituency are struggling to pay for basic groceries. The OBR's analysis following today's statement has said that we face the largest fall in disposable incomes since the 1950s. Will the Chancellor visit my constituency, sit down with the people who use the local food bank, many of whom are in work, and see just how little the policies announced today will do to support them, to get them into work, and to allow them to live with dignity in their community?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman is simply wrong. Those in work, particularly on low incomes, will benefit disproportionately from the policies that have been announced today. I have given plenty of examples already, but a single mother with two children who is renting, on universal credit, and working full time, earning the national living wage, will be £1,600 better off as a result

[*Rishi Sunak*]

of all the policies we have announced on taxes and welfare. We are supporting exactly the people the hon. Gentleman talks about.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Climate Change Committee's estimates suggest that the overall price tag for retrofitting the UK's homes—considered some of the most leaky and energy-inefficient in Europe—is £27 billion a year over the next 25 years. Will the Chancellor recognise that this issue needs real commitment and investment, not just tinkering around the edges?

Rishi Sunak: No. In the spending review, we announced the largest investment in upgrading home energy efficiency that this country has ever seen—billions and billions of pounds across a range of different schemes, helping hundreds of thousands of households with the costs of upgrading their energy.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Can the Chancellor explain why, in the fifth richest country in the world, and under his stewardship of the economy, this morning's news reported that a mother would not accept potatoes from a food bank because she did not have enough money to boil them?

Rishi Sunak: I am very sorry to hear that, and I am hopeful—in fact, confident—that the policies we have announced today will help those who are most vulnerable. We have made sure, as we have over the last two years, that we are standing by the British people, and that is what the policies announced today do.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I am old enough to remember the rampant inflation of the 1990s, when I started my career. I am old enough to remember when, under Ted Heath's Government, we had to go to the local café because we had no lights on in the house. However, I am not old enough to remember Anthony Eden and the 1950s. What does the Chancellor have to say today to pensioners who worked through the 1950s about the fact that he is presiding over the greatest fall in living standards since that time?

Rishi Sunak: I am pleased that, because of the actions of Conservative-led Governments since 2010, the state pension is £2,000 higher today; 700 of that is specifically because of the triple lock. That shows that this Government are on the side of pensioners.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The Chancellor is proposing to cut the value of state social security payments by at least 4% and putting up tax rates for those on average and below-average incomes, yet he refuses even to countenance asking those who have extreme wealth, or the corporations that are making obscene profits, to pay a little more. Is not the truth, Chancellor, that this is just a plan to increase inequality in the United Kingdom?

Rishi Sunak: We are asking companies—especially large successful companies—to pay more. That was announced last year and legislated for, and it will come into force next year. The corporation tax rate will rise from 19% to 25% to ensure that we do spread the burden fairly in recovering from coronavirus.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): The household support fund exists only because, thanks to this Chancellor, people do not have enough income to eat or to pay their bills. With pensions and benefits set to rise by a measly 3.1% and the minimum wage by 59p, and with inflation peaking at over 7%, today's uplift to the fund is more evidence of his continued failure to protect the hardest hit, isn't it?

Rishi Sunak: The national living wage is actually going up by 6.6%—it is one of the highest increases we have seen in the national living wage, and it will mean that someone working full time on the national living wage earns £1,000 more this year.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The village of Altnaharra in my constituency is the coldest place in the UK every single winter. A great number of households in my constituency rely on domestic fuel for their heating—they have absolutely no choice. Right now, they are faced with crippling bills landing on their doorsteps. I do not want the Chancellor to feel that he has to repeat himself, but could I ask in the spirit of good will and co-operation whether he will agree to my meeting some of his ministerial team to look at different ways in which we could tackle this problem, which is hurting my constituents, in the coldest part of Britain, very badly indeed?

Rishi Sunak: I am always happy to hear suggestions from the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, to arrange a meeting for him. I wanted to make sure that those off the gas grid still benefited from the energy package that we put in place in February, and it will work on electricity meters, so that will happen. As a rural MP myself, I appreciate the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises, and I will happily arrange the meeting for him.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Oil and gas giants are making £900 profit per second, while millions of people are having sleepless nights worrying about whether they will be able to heat their homes. Does the Chancellor think that the right of these firms to make these super-profits is more important than the right of people to stay warm? If not, surely now is the time for a windfall tax on these profits to fund lowering people's energy bills.

Rishi Sunak: I just remind the hon. Gentleman that we already have a supplementary corporation tax on oil and gas companies. They pay 40% corporation tax—twice as much as the rate paid by all other companies—and it is right that they do. Going forward, as the Prime Minister's strategy will outline, we want to see more investment in the North sea, more British energy security and more British jobs.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Private sector tenants on low incomes in my constituency face ever-rising rents, which in many cases are well above local housing allowance levels. These are people on universal credit, and over half are working families who are having to make the choice of whether to heat or eat. What assessment has the Chancellor made of the levels of local housing allowance so that my constituents do not have to take £200, £300 and £400 from their non-housing element to pay their rent?

Rishi Sunak: Because of the increases to local housing allowance that this Government put in place for the pandemic, and that they have maintained, about 1.5 million people—the poorest in our society—will have £600 a year more in local housing allowance, which will help. The hon. Lady talked about a family on low income. Just so that she is aware, as a result of all the tax and welfare changes we have made, including to the taper and the national living wage, a family with two children that is renting, with one parent working full time and the other working part time on the national living wage, will be about £3,000 better off. I know that that will help them through the challenging months ahead.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Brownings the Bakers makes and sells products and distributes them right across the UK through some of the major UK supermarkets. I wrote to the Chancellor highlighting the fact that its electricity costs have increased from £4,000 a week to £11,000 a week. If it wants fixed costs, it has been offered an eye-watering £17,000 a week for a two-year contract. Obviously, the Treasury makes more money in VAT returns out of these eye-watering increases, so rather than the Chancellor having to write back to me, can he confirm to me here and now that I can tell John Gall, the managing director, that he is doing nothing to help businesses such as Brownings the Bakers?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman is simply wrong on VAT. If he looks at the figures published today, he will see that the OBR's estimate of VAT receipts in the forthcoming year is actually lower than the amount it had expected in the autumn. We are providing a tax cut for small businesses today—£1,000 due to the increase in the employment allowance, and that will kick in in just a couple of weeks.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): As always, the Chancellor has forgotten the poorest—those claiming pensions, those claiming social security and those living below the minimum income threshold, who have been hit by the cost of living crisis. All that my poorest constituents want is food, warmth and shelter against soaring house prices. All they got was 6p a day from the housing support fund on average. Will the Chancellor go back again and review the rise in social security payments? Those people need that money, or else they will go hungry, they will experience hypothermia and they will be homeless.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. It is important that the questions are very brief at this stage if I am going to get the last few people in.

Rishi Sunak: With regard to supporting those who are homeless, the spending review in the autumn increased support for homelessness by 85%, compared with 2019 levels—to over £640 million, I think, a year. We are currently seeing the number of rough sleepers at very low levels, compared with the last several years, and hopefully at the lowest level in a decade by the end of this Parliament.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I have asked this of the Chancellor on numerous occasions. On Monday, I led a delegation to Downing Street to deliver a letter urging him to grant a right to food. With

millions having to choose between starving or freezing in their homes because of the cost of living crisis, when will the penny drop with the Chancellor that hunger is a political choice, and it is he who controls the levers to eradicate it? Does he agree that it is a dereliction of his duty to the security of every household that we all serve not to enshrine into UK law access to food for all?

Rishi Sunak: We have actually invested more than £200 million a year in the holiday activity and food programme to provide both food and enriching activities to hundreds of thousands of children across the country.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): In Putney, 31% of children live in poverty. The biggest measure that the Chancellor could bring in is scrapping the two-child benefit cap, which is cruel and leaves children in poverty. Has he assessed the two-child benefit cap, and when will he scrap it?

Rishi Sunak: I am pleased that there are now 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty compared with 2010. The best way to make sure that children do not grow up in poverty is to ensure that they do not grow up in a workless household, and there are 700,000 fewer of those today as a result of the actions of this and previous Conservative Governments.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The National Audit Office has found that, in a single year, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs allowed more than £300 million of fraudulent claims for research and development tax relief. We also know from other NAO reports that the Treasury is woefully bad at producing evidence to demonstrate that any of the tax relief policies actually deliver the required objectives. With that in mind, what assurance can we have that the announcement that the Chancellor has made today will lead to a genuine real-terms increase in R&D spend, and will not just become yet another taxpayer-funded get-rich-quick scheme?

Rishi Sunak: Government spending on R&D is increasing considerably over this Parliament, but the hon. Gentleman is right to point out some of the issues with our existing relief schemes. They do not work as well as they should. We are committed to tackling them. The final announcement will be made in the autumn for effect in the spring.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): Figures from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research have shown that destitution has more than doubled from 197,400 to over 400,000. Destitution is defined as two single people living on £100 a week after housing costs. Is the Chancellor happy that none of the announcements today will benefit those who are in destitution?

Rishi Sunak: That is categorically not the case. The policies that we have announced today will help British families up and down the country in all sorts of circumstances: we are making sure that work pays; we are supporting people into work; we are cutting the cost of fuel; and we have a plan to let our people to keep more of their own money in the years ahead. It is the right way to help people, and all the distribution analysis published today supports the fact that we are doing most for those on the lowest incomes.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Unpaid carers are increasingly worried about how they will afford to pay their bills. I am sure that the Chancellor will agree that they make an essential contribution to the UK. Will he set out whether he is considering any further measures to support unpaid carers?

Rishi Sunak: We are grateful to carers everywhere for the fantastic job that they do. I am confident that they and their families will benefit from the policies that we have announced today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chancellor for the help that he has given to my constituents. However, a constituent of mine has recently been in touch to say that the removal of red diesel would see her business experiencing an unsustainable increase in the cost of sales by some £400,000 annually. I am not being churlish, but does the Chancellor agree that this increase has come at a breaking point for businesses, and will he make allowances for the continuation of red diesel until the economy gets back on its feet?

Rishi Sunak: These changes were announced two years ago. They were consulted on and there are various exemptions in place, particularly to protect agriculture, which I know will be important to the hon. Gentleman. None the less, it is right that we go ahead with the changes as legislated.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Chancellor for his statement.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to use this opportunity to allow the Chancellor to hear a clarification. He suggested that the Scottish Government might want to follow the UK Government in eventually introducing a 19% rate of income tax. Would it be possible to get the Chancellor to correct the record? There is already a 19% rate of income tax for the lowest earners in Scotland, so in fact it is the UK Government who have to play catch-up with the Scottish Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker: As the hon. Lady knows, the Chair is not responsible for the speeches of Ministers. I am sure that, if any incorrect information has been given, the record will be corrected. Obviously, the Ministers on the Front Bench have heard her point.

Daniel Morgan Independent Panel Report

2.54 pm

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the publication of the report of Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services into the Metropolitan police's counter-corruption arrangements.

In June last year, the Home Secretary came to the House to report on the findings of the Daniel Morgan independent panel. The panel's report detailed a litany of historical failings by the Metropolitan police in respect of multiple investigations—failings that irreparably damaged the chances of a successful prosecution for Daniel Morgan's brutal killing. My thoughts, and I am sure all Members' thoughts, remain with Daniel's family. I first met them over a decade ago.

As part of the Government's response to that report, the Home Secretary commissioned the inspectorate to undertake an inspection of the Metropolitan police's current approach to counter-corruption arrangements. I should note at the outset that the inspectorate did make some positive findings. The Metropolitan police remains an exemplar in investigating serious corruption and has good arrangements in place to support whistleblowers. It has also almost eliminated the backlog of officers awaiting security vetting, which was identified as a problem in a previous report. The inspectorate found no evidence that the force deliberately sought to frustrate the work of the Daniel Morgan independent panel, but the broad thrust and overarching conclusions of the report are troubling.

This inspection was commissioned to provide assurance for Daniel Morgan's family and the wider public that the force had learned from failings in the past and had robust arrangements in place to prevent, identify and tackle corruption in its ranks. I am afraid that it is deeply disappointing that, in the light of the findings of this report, I cannot provide this assurance to the House. Indeed, the inspectorate felt that the Metropolitan police approach suggested

"a degree of indifference to the risk of corruption".

This is alarming.

Corruption poses a significant threat wherever it rears its ugly head. If it is allowed to take root and wrap its tentacles around organisations and people, the potential impact is profound. This is especially true for policing—an institution that relies so heavily on public confidence and trust. The inspectorate's report outlines a range of issues across all the systems that police forces employ to identify and manage corruption risks. This includes a failure to properly monitor recruits who could pose risks and to routinely share routine intelligence on officers.

The report paints a worrying picture of the Metropolitan police's approach to exhibit and property management, creating opportunities for those tempted to abuse their position, and posing a risk to investigations.

The inspectorate found that there were more than 2,000 warrant cards unaccounted for. This is particularly concerning, coming as it does just over a year after a

police officer abused his position to murder a young woman in a heinous crime that shocked our country to its core.

The report concludes that the Metropolitan police is not able to confirm whether officers working in the most sensitive areas of policing have the right levels of vetting. Furthermore, despite repeated recommendations and good progress made in this area in other forces across England and Wales, the force cannot proactively monitor its IT systems—a crucial tool in identifying corruption. In total, the report contains five causes of concern, two areas for improvement and 20 recommendations for change.

Yesterday, the Home Secretary wrote to the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and the Mayor of London to set out her expectation that they respond to her with a clear action plan to remedy these failings. I welcome the deputy commissioner's statement yesterday, recognising the need for comprehensive action. I put particular emphasis here on the responsibilities of the Mayor of London. Beyond the statutory responsibility on the Mayor to respond to the inspectorate's report within 56 days, it is incumbent on City Hall to hold the Metropolitan police's leadership to account for responding to past failings. This clearly has not happened here, and I urge the Mayor to work with the Home Office to ensure that a new commissioner can address these failings.

As she said in her statement to the House last year, the Home Secretary intends to update the House on the progress made in responding to the wide range of issues raised in the Daniel Morgan independent panel report. The Metropolitan police published their response last Friday to the recommendations directed at them and, now that we have the inspectorate's report, we expect to provide our overarching update soon.

Finally, I remind the House that the Home Secretary has also commissioned HMICFRS to undertake a wider inspection of vetting, counter-corruption and forces' approach to identifying and tackling misogyny in their ranks. That is looking across England and Wales and will provide a crucial evidence base for part 2 of the Angiolini inquiry and inform any broader policy or legislative changes that might be required.

The report comes at a time when the Metropolitan police are under intense scrutiny. I have found myself at the Dispatch Box discussing the force's culture and standards all too frequently in recent months. As someone who over the years has worked alongside the Met and seen at first hand the incredible things that they are capable of achieving, I know there are thousands of officers, staff and volunteers across the organisation who perform their duties with skill, professionalism and pride every day. However, when things go wrong, it is vital to acknowledge that fact and take every necessary step to ensure that the failings of the past are not repeated. I commend this statement to the House.

3 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement—three hours' advance sight, which is very good.

Yesterday, some of us gathered on Westminster Bridge to remember the Westminster Bridge attack five years ago. We remembered how our police ran into danger to protect us, and we remembered PC Keith Palmer, who lost his life. It is with great sadness that we go from a

day commemorating the very best of policing to discussing a report which, I am afraid, contains some very significant criticisms of the Metropolitan police.

It is now 35 years since Daniel Morgan was murdered in a pub car park in south London—35 years for his family to wait for justice. I pay tribute to them, as the Minister has done. Daniel Morgan's son lives in my constituency, and I know this report will be deeply upsetting for him and his family. The report lays bare issues of real concern. It is highly critical and tells a damning story of police corruption, of lessons not learned and of flawed procedures. The inspector noted with dismay that no one,

"had adopted the view that this must never happen again".

The Met must accept all the recommendations included in the report and implement them in full with all possible speed.

As the Minister rightly noted, there was praise too in this report. For example, it was clear that the Met's homicide investigation arrangements bear little resemblance to those of 35 years ago. The force solves the vast majority of homicides it investigates, as I can testify to in my own patch in Croydon.

Londoners need and deserve a police service they can not only trust, but be proud of. Whether on racism, homophobia, violence against women or corruption, we need to see the urgent reforms that will make that a reality. The outgoing commissioner must begin the process of implementation, but it must be a top priority for the new commissioner, who will carry forward the work.

However, the issues raised have national consequences. The Home Office must not stand back. Real leadership is needed. The Home Secretary and her Department must commit to engaging seriously with the issue of police reform, to avoid repeating such a scandal and to avoid a lifetime of pain and hurt for families like Daniel Morgan's.

Labour has called for an overhaul of police standards, including reviews of vetting, training, misconduct proceedings and use of social media. It is vital that the Minister takes steps to identify whether the problems highlighted in the report are systemic in other forces across the country. The report shows that 50 people a year who had committed offences were recruited to the Met, including some who had connections to known criminals.

Given the seriousness of that finding, has the Minister asked all forces urgently to inform the Home Office of the number of new recruits every year who have committed offences? If he has, will he publish that data now? If he has not, why on earth has he not? We know that 2,000 warrant cards are unaccounted for. Has he asked all forces to inform the Home Office immediately how many of their warrant cards are unaccounted for? If he has, will he agree to publish that data?

In addition, the report notes that the Met does not know whether all those in sensitive posts have been cleared to the level needed. Is the Minister checking that nationally? The report also notes serious concerns about the storage and security of firearms in the Met. That is very worrying. Will the Minister commit to looking into that nationally?

We have a Home Office inquiry into culture and standards in the Met, which the Home Office has refused to put on a statutory footing. How can the Minister be

[Sarah Jones]

sure that the Angiolini inquiry will not fall foul of the same stumbling blocks encountered by the Daniel Morgan inquiry and mentioned in this report?

The original Daniel Morgan inquiry recommended a statutory duty of candour for police officers, but the Government opposed Labour's amendments to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill to achieve that. Given the challenges faced to get information during the inquiry that we see in the report, will the Government change their mind and back our proposal?

The Home Secretary has promised a review of vetting standards, but the terms of reference have only recently been published and we do not know when the review will report. What is the Home Office doing in the meantime to ensure that vetting across the country is being carried out to the highest and most rigorous standards?

The Minister highlighted the role of the Mayor of London. The report clearly states that the joint MPS and Crown Prosecution Service review of the Daniel Morgan case in 2011-12 identified opportunities for organisational learning, but it is clear that the MPS paid little, if any, attention to the joint report when it was published. Why did the previous Mayor of London totally fail to ensure that action was taken after that 2012 report?

Finally, the Minister has said he will provide an overarching update in response to both this report and the recommendations in the panel report. That is welcome, but can he give us a concrete timeline for it?

I end by saying that the role of the HMICFRS was not to reinvestigate the murder, but to consider the lessons to be learned from what has happened. The family of Daniel have not seen justice done for his murder, and it is with them that our thoughts must remain.

Kit Malthouse: The various points that the hon. Lady raised in the first half of her remarks will be addressed by Her Majesty's inspectorate as it looks at vetting procedures across the whole country. The purpose of the investigation commissioned by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary was to show the leadership that she is looking for and to expose what we now know to be the systematic failings of the organisation and its failure to address the problems of the report over recent years. We will know more on the questions that the hon. Lady rightly asks about the worrying issues raised by this report when HMI concludes its national inspection, which I hope will be shortly.

On the hon. Lady's point about the duty of candour, as I explained during the debate on the consideration of Lords amendments to the Policing Bill, we changed the regulations to make it a disciplinary offence, subject to dismissal, not to co-operate with an investigation, which we believe is a stronger sanction. The inspection report said that the Metropolitan Police had co-operated with the independent panel.

I am disappointed at the hon. Lady's lack of attention to the oversight mechanism of the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime. Over the past five years, the Mayor of London has been in control of an entire organisation whose job it is to hold the Metropolitan Police to account and to drive standards up. Certainly, in the four years between 2008 and 2012, when I was Deputy

Mayor for Policing and Crime, that was exactly what we tried to do. We initiated a race and faith inquiry that looked more widely at culture across the whole of the Met Police to try to drive improvement.

I would hope that the Mayor—[*Interruption.*] Madam Deputy Speaker, is there any chance you could ask the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) to stop barracking from a sedentary position? This is a very serious matter that must be addressed and taken seriously by all levels of government, and that includes the Mayor of London. Given that that is the entire purpose of the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, I am afraid I am not willing to ignore the fact that the holding of the organisation to account is primarily the function of City Hall.

We at the Home Office have our part to play in setting national standards, and we will absolutely do that, whether that is reviewing with the College of Policing the professional practice around vetting, as we are doing, or changing the regulations if we need to do so. In the immediate short term, however, the statutory obligation to respond lies with the Mayor of London and I hope he will fulfil his obligations within the 56 days set in law by this House.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): As the son of a retired police officer, I know the incredible work that the majority of police do to fight crime and keep us safe. When officers breach the high standards expected of them, it fundamentally undermines the trust that their work relies on. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning the behaviour revealed in this report, and send a clear message that this kind of behaviour cannot be tolerated in any police force anywhere in the country?

Kit Malthouse: I applaud my hon. Friend's sentiment. As someone who, like me, has an intimate knowledge of policing, I am sure he will acknowledge that there will be thousands of police officers up and down the land who are as disappointed and distressed by the revelations today as we are. They want to work in a profession—a vocation—of which they can be proud and which they know is trusted by the public. Making sure that this kind of corruption and behaviour is rooted out will be as much a part of their motivation as it is ours.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I was six years old when Daniel Morgan was murdered in my constituency just round the corner from where I lived. His brutal murder shocked our community, and it was made worse by the fact that no one was convicted and that last year's inquiry cited institutional corruption in the Met. Daniel's family have campaigned for justice for 35 years. No other family should ever have to go through this, yet yesterday's damning report found that not nearly enough has been done to ensure that it does not happen again. Will the Minister personally ensure that the next Met commissioner cleans up this failing force?

Kit Malthouse: I will certainly do my best to make sure that that is the case. As I say, the Home Secretary has written to the Mayor of London and the current commissioner asking for an assertive action plan to bring about these changes. I am sure the hon. Lady will have noted that HMI has put a limit of 12 months on the 20 improvements and changes that it needs to see, and it will require really assertive action by the Met

police to get all that work done within that 12-month period. Many people in this House will have had involvement or contact with the Morgan family. I myself was privileged to meet his mother on a number of occasions when I was Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime, and indeed, along with other Members across the House, I pressed for the original inquiry. Given our commitment to their campaign and the incredible dedication they have shown, we now have a duty to do exactly as the hon. Lady says and make sure it does not happen again.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): As the Minister himself has said, the regularity with which he has had to come to the Dispatch Box to answer questions about the culture, standards and misjudgments of the Metropolitan police is alarming. Yesterday's shocking report is just the latest in a long list of recent failings. Thousands of dedicated rank and file police officers work very hard and put themselves at risk every day to protect us. They, and millions of Londoners, deserve leadership in the Met that they can trust and have confidence in, not leaders who have "indifference" to the risks of corruption. Will the Minister confirm today that the new Metropolitan Police Commissioner appointment will not just be made by the Home Office and a Prime Minister who is himself under criminal investigation but will secure the approval of the Mayor of London and be subject to a cross-party vote of the Home Affairs Committee and the London Assembly's police and crime committee?

Kit Malthouse: The process and appointment of the Met commissioner are established in law, and we cannot obviate that, but we are all, I hope, committed to making sure that the person we appoint will bring about the changes that we are all seeking as well as continuing the fight against crime in the capital. In the meantime, as the current commissioner exits, I believe that in the proposed acting commissioner and current deputy commissioner we have an individual of integrity and commitment who has already made very welcome public statements about driving forward change.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing convention to be waived so that I can speak from the Back Benches on this matter. Alastair Morgan, Daniel's brother, has been campaigning for some justice for his brother for 35 years and I have stood alongside him for the past 17. The Minister referred to the "original report". It was not the original report. There have been many, many inquiries. There have been inquiries into inquiries. This has been going on for years and years, with corruption layered upon corruption and nobody ever telling the truth. It is no wonder, in those circumstances, that Alastair has said that the Metropolitan police

"cared more about its own tatty reputation than solving my brother's murder."

Now what do we see? We see an official report that states that it has

"found no evidence that someone, somewhere, had adopted the view that this must never happen again."

Nobody even cares if it happens again. What is the Minister going to do about that? What are we going to do about the Met?

Kit Malthouse: I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her commitment to the family campaign as well. As I explained, we have written to the Mayor and the commissioner demanding a plan of action and that they respond, as they have to in law, to the inspectorate with exactly that—an assertive, committed plan for change. Certainly the public statements that I have seen from the deputy commissioner indicate his personal commitment. Pleasingly, he made a particular point of saying that the police have not given up on the investigation and their attempt to try to catch Daniel's killers. I hope that we will see a conclusion to that investigation as soon as possible.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Daniel Morgan case is one of those that I am most familiar with as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice. If it were not for a Welsh solicitor called Glyn Maddocks, who has tirelessly followed this and never given up on it, we would not be where we are today. I pay tribute to him, his work, and the support he has given to the miscarriages of justice group. This is a very important occasion. I am a little sad that the Minister has made it a bit party political in blaming the Mayor. The fact is that we are faced with a tremendous crisis in the Met and in any police force where the relationship between the police breaks down and becomes sloppy, and we see—I did the research on this and I was astonished by it—the close links between senior Met police and organised crime. Surely that was wrong and it has to be sorted out.

Kit Malthouse: I also pay tribute, as the hon. Gentleman has, to the entire team that have supported the family. I met them when I was Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime. I have to confess that when I heard the story I was open-mouthed at what was revealed, hence the strong support I gave to the then Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), for an inquiry. Admittedly, as the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said, it is not the first, but hopefully it will bring us to some kind of conclusion on this matter. I was not seeking to make a party political point, merely to point out that there is a direct responsibility at City Hall—one that I took when I was doing the job—to drive forward the conclusion to this matter not only to reach some kind of closure for the family, but to ensure significant change in the organisation that will mean that this can never happen again.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): We are back here again discussing the police. Some of the issues in this report about the vetting of police officers and the fact that some had links to known criminals will be quite shocking for a number of my constituents, who continue to be stopped and searched. Some of those constituents are on the gangs matrix, which had such a massive impact on their life in terms of finding jobs, access to benefits, and ability to rent. The Minister will know that in 2019 a freedom of information request revealed that a person as young as 13 was on the gangs matrix. How will he help to restore confidence in our communities who want to work with the police in addressing some of the issues, when we have known criminals involved, people not being vetted properly and some of my young people continuing to be on the gangs matrix?

Kit Malthouse: The solution to the problem of building trust between London's various communities and the police is complex, but there are a variety of tools that we can deploy. First, we can make sure that the force better reflects the population of London. I am pleased that we are working closely with City Hall and the Met on their recruitment and diversity agenda, which is an important one that has been ongoing for some time. At the same time, we need to make sure that we are recruiting the right people, and this investigation has unearthed problems in our doing that. We need to make sure that the vetting net is as tight as possible so that we are getting in the right people with the right values who are able to deal with the hon. Lady's constituents and others with integrity and respect to achieve the end we want to achieve, which is lower crime in the capital. That does require, as she says, that people know that when they meet a police officer in the street, or they are dealt with even under stop and search, they are dealing with somebody who has been through a rigorous process. Over the next 12 months we will monitor this closely and work with City Hall to make sure that that is exactly what it introduces.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): We have to rely on an efficient and effective police service that has the trust of all its communities, and we know from recent reports that the Met in particular has taken an absolute battering. Over the past decade, we lost 20,000 police. In the past couple of years, there has been a rapid ramping up to get back those police numbers and to deal with the issue of natural wastage. This is an incredible pressure on recruitment and vetting. What assessment has the Minister made of the capacity—not only within the Met, but nationwide—to ensure that speed of recruitment is not leading to the inclusion of people who have no right to be on the streets of our capital, policing it?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is right that the rapid recruitment has put strains on the system, but we have been monitoring it very closely to ensure that the system is able to cope, and I believe that it is. I know she is not suggesting that the vast majority of recruits are not right-thinking and correct in their values, and I hope and believe that is the case. One of the improvements that the inspectorate did note that the Metropolitan police has achieved over the past couple of years is an elimination almost of the vetting backlog, which just three or four years ago stood at something like 37,000, astonishingly.¹ That has now been almost eliminated. That is a silver lining to the cloud of this report. As far as vetting is concerned, we have debated that just recently in the House. There are improvements that need to be made, not least on the monitoring of social media, which has just started in the Metropolitan police. It is an area to which we need to pay constant attention if we are to build that trust with London's communities.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): This review today is rightly about what the Metropolitan police is doing now, but it has resulted from the Daniel Morgan report, and there are still outstanding issues arising from that report, as referred to by the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), who is no longer in her place. Indeed, my constituent, a former serving police officer, approached me for support because he had a complaint in relation

to his treatment by the Metropolitan police while he was involved in the Morgan inquiry, and he has had no satisfactory outcome. He has now approached the IOPC. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can get some degree of finding for my constituent?

Kit Malthouse: I am hesitant to intervene in an independent process. Given the hon. Lady's experience in policing, she will know that. If she thinks a meeting with me and her constituent would be useful once the IOPC has concluded, I would be more than happy to do so.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It has been a torrid time for the Met, but I am not so concerned about the Met; I am concerned about constituents of mine and those of us all who worry about policing. We had the report just last week about child Q. People in my constituency and elsewhere, and particularly black parents, black pupils and parents of black pupils, are worried about what the impact is on them. I know that the response has to be done in 12 months, and I worry that that will divert the Met to dealing with corruption, which obviously has to be dealt with. Can the Minister give some comfort from the Dispatch Box today that the issues of racism and inappropriate action against child Q will be dealt with much quicker than waiting for an IOPC report? Action needs to happen quicker. Tackling corruption has to happen, but not just that.

Kit Malthouse: As I said in the urgent question on child Q, I am hopeful that the IOPC will conclude its investigation on that matter shortly, and then we can quickly learn the lessons from that, exactly as the hon. Lady says, and hopefully ensure that that does not happen again. Just to be clear on the timeline, the Mayor has a statutory duty to respond to this inspection within 56 days with an action plan. The IOPC has put a 12-month time limit on implementing its 20 recommendations for change. Some may be done quicker than that, and some have already started. For example, my understanding is that inexplicably, the Met police is the only force in the country that does not have the software in place to monitor the inappropriate use of its systems. The work to implement that has started already, and I hope that will be done before 12 months. Such is the importance of this issue, I am happy to commit to coming back to the House at some future point, when completion is in sight or done on all these 20 matters, and report that to the Members who are concerned.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): A corrupt network of police officers, including senior officers, and journalists, including their senior management, private investigators and senior management at News International were all involved in the cover-up here. It is one of the biggest instances of corruption and one of the most painful ones we have witnessed in many years. Is it not time that we introduced into statute law a new offence of misconduct in public office? It is a common-law offence that is difficult to prosecute and to lay out the parameters of. We should put it in statute so that those who commit it and those who incite others to do it can be sent to prison.

Kit Malthouse: I cannot comment on the hon. Gentleman's claims, not least because happily, as the deputy Metropolitan Police Commissioner has confirmed,

1. [Official Report, 29 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 3MC.]

this is an ongoing investigation. They have not given up, and they should not give up. However, I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making in general. While a number of offences could be committed in a similar hypothetical situation, such as conspiracy, it may be the case that he has a point that we need to consider.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): We have yet another report raising serious concerns about the Met, but also a number of questions that are applicable to all police forces in the country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) said. One issue that has been raised with me by a senior officer, and that applies nationally, is that officers who are found guilty of gross misconduct are often not only reinstated, but sometimes promoted. What is the Minister doing with the Met, police forces around the country and the complaints system to address this issue?

Kit Malthouse: I am sure the hon. Lady understands that where the office of constable is concerned, matters of discipline, dismissal or other punishments are effectively an independent process. The punishment is decided by panels that have independent legally qualified chairs. It would be inappropriate for me to comment on the various decisions she has talked about. Having said that, we constantly pay attention to how the disciplinary process is impacting on the integrity of UK policing. If adjustments are required, as they were two years ago, we make them.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Daniel Morgan was murdered 35 years ago, and this whole inquiry has been consistently bedevilled by police corruption. I do not think this report gets us to the bottom of the issue. We have to go much, much further. The report tells us that there has been a loose association with confidentiality and security for evidence, and that has been consistent over all these years that we have been trying to get to the bottom of this case. The Minister now has to accept that we have to have a root and branch inquiry. He has admitted himself that he has had to come to this Dispatch Box too many times to apologise for the Metropolitan police. This single investigation will not get to the bottom of it; we need something much more fundamental, such as an independent inquiry.

Kit Malthouse: As I say, HMI is looking at these issues more widely across the whole of UK policing, and we will learn some lessons from that report. But we

should not forget that the Commissioner of the Met herself has commissioned Dame Louise Casey to look at the internal culture of the Met, and that will give us some indications of where we should go next, if at all. Beyond that, similarly, stage 2 of the Angiolini review, which will look at this issue more widely, will be able to give us some information as to where we should go next, if at all.

This is a building picture. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that this is a very distressing, alarming and scandalous story that has run for far too many years. We have a duty in this House to try to get to the bottom of what happened and to make changes to ensure that it does not happen again, but that will not be a silver-bullet revelation; it will be a building picture, and this report is part of that. The report informs our work for now, and we will look to the future to see where we go next.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. While an apology is, I am sure, welcomed by the family, perhaps what would be more welcome is steps being taken to prevent this from happening again. Does he accept that there is a duty of care, and will he undertake to implement the necessary changes, which the report highlights in great detail, to ensure that the Met police continues to be a premium police service that is respected globally, as it has been for many years?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman asks his question very eloquently, and I completely agree with him. My primary concern in this affair is to get justice for the family of Daniel Morgan, who have campaigned for many years on this issue—a truly scandalous story that has involved many of us on both sides of the House. My second concern is to ensure that the Metropolitan police is fit to serve Londoners and that they can have trust in it. As somebody who, I must confess, has great affection for the Met, having worked for it in the past and seen the incredible things of which it is capable, I say to the officers of the Metropolitan police who want to know that they are working for exactly the organisation that the hon. Gentleman describes—one that is deeply respected across the world, not just for its ability to catch every murderer or to stop knife crime in London or to put more rapists behind bars, but for its internal conduct and culture of ethics and integrity—that that is what we have to be about.

Business of the House

3.30 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): I should like to make a short business statement following the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his spring statement. Tomorrow's business will now be:

THURSDAY 24 MARCH—Consideration of a Business of the House motion, followed by all stages of the National Insurance Contributions (Increase of Thresholds) Bill.

I shall make a further business statement in the usual way tomorrow.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Deputy Leader of the House.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for advance sight of the business statement.

Even after the changes today, under this Government Britain is facing the highest tax burden in 70 years. The Chancellor confirmed today that £24 billion of additional tax rises are about to hit the British people. He is raising taxes again and again. He proclaims that he believes in lower taxes, but at the same time he is actually hiking national insurance contributions.

What provisions has the Leader of the House made for the rescheduling of the two very important Backbench Business debates tomorrow—one on war pensions and armed forces compensation scheme payments, and the other on the impact of long covid on the UK workforce? Will he confirm when the National Insurance Contributions (Increase of Thresholds) Bill will be published on the parliamentary website and copies made available in the Vote Office? What provision will there be for right hon. and hon. Members to amend the Bill?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. While it is a pleasure to see her at the Dispatch Box, I hope that the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), makes a speedy return.

I am not going to get drawn into debate today—the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) seemed to wanted to try to draw me in—but I can say that I am very much aware that we are stealing the time tomorrow of the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), and I apologise to him. I will open a channel of communication to try to accommodate his business on the Order Paper as soon as possible.

The business motion tomorrow will set out how the Bill could be amended. My understanding is that the Bill is already published on the Government website.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Is the Leader of the House able to tell the House how much time he

proposes tomorrow's business motion will provide for the House to debate the Bill? It is good to know that we will be able to make amendments, but we need to know how to do that. Knowing the amount of time for debate will help Members to plan for tomorrow.

Mark Spencer: Yes, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we will protect up to five hours for all stages of the Bill under the business motion. Second Reading will be brought to a conclusion after three hours, and remaining stages after a further two hours.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I echo many of the comments of the shadow Deputy Leader of the House, particularly as I have an interest in this. I was very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating to me the debate on the war pensions and armed forces compensation scheme payments, so I have a personal interest in when that might be reallocated. I am sure we will find out in due course when the Backbench Business Committee will have that time reallocated, because the House will be looking to hear about both of those very important issues.

I am encouraged to hear that there will be sufficient time tomorrow, but I definitely want to hear more about how the Bill can be looked at in more detail and be amended, because that is not yet entirely clear.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. As I say, the Business of the House motion will be taken first thing tomorrow morning. It will set out how the Bill can be amended and the time allocation so that the Bill can be fully scrutinised in the House tomorrow.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Can I thank the Leader of the House for suggesting that he will keep us informed about any potential opportunities for the Backbench Business that has been removed from tomorrow? I would remind the Leader of the House that it is not my business but Back Benchers' business that has been removed from tomorrow's Order Paper. All I would ask is that the Backbench Business Committee gets enough notice, so that we can inform the relevant Members leading the debates, if we are to be allowed additional time outwith the normal Thursday sessions.

Mark Spencer: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question, and I am very keen to try to accommodate him. My office door is open to him this afternoon if he wants to come and try to work that out between us. Let us have a conversation, as I am very keen to try to accommodate him as soon as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Members interested in tabling amendments to the National Insurance Contributions (Increase of Thresholds) Bill, which has been announced for consideration tomorrow, should contact the Public Bill Office as soon as possible.

Points of Order

3.36 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. At 7.30 am today, without a court order, the chief executive officer of developer Fruition Properties, Mr Mani Khirya, seized possession of the premises at 2 Scrubs Lane, NW10—covering my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler)—thereby evicting the City Mission church, its pastor Des Hall, and the nursery and food bank they have run for many years, serving thousands of our constituents. This brutal and despicable act echoes the predatory capitalism we have seen from P&O management, and punishes the poorest people in the middle of the worst economic crisis for 50 years. Can you advise me on how I can use the procedures of this House to highlight the plight of Rev. Des Hall and his congregation, and call to account the people who are destroying our community and its champions?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. I think, to be honest, that he has already achieved his aim through the point of order, but the Table Office can advise him on what other procedures are available for him to take this matter further.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise for not giving you notice, but as this has just happened again, I want to ask your advice about etiquette in the House. I always thought that Ministers addressed Opposition Members as hon. Gentlemen or hon. Ladies and Government Members as hon. Friends. It seems to me that I am constantly referred to by Ministers as an hon. Gentleman, and I am wondering if I am sitting in the right place. Would you give me some advice?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Well, all I can say is that to me you are an hon. Friend, sir. I hope that gives you some reassurance.

Short and Holiday-Let Accommodation (Registration) Bill

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

3.38 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a national register of short and holiday-let accommodation; to give local authorities powers to require information in association with that register; and for connected purposes.

Over the last 10 years or so, the opportunities offered by the digital economy have transformed the world, much of it for the good. The sharing economy that digitalisation has opened up—from ride sharing to home sharing—has brought many benefits, but deregulation often has its downsides, and the short let and sharing accommodation sector is no exception. From the heart of London, where Government deregulation after 2015 has contributed to an explosion in short lets, to coastal resorts and towns and cities the length and breadth of the country, short or holiday lets—often referred to generically by the name of the largest such company, Airbnb, but actually spreading far beyond it—are an issue that now requires effective management.

This is not, of course, about banning owners from renting out rooms or even their whole properties in line with how the sharing economy was originally conceived. Owners can earn valuable money, put empty space to good use and contribute to their local tourist economies, and all of this is welcome. To give praise where it is due, Airbnb and many short let hosts made a very significant contribution during covid and are now engaging over the Ukrainian refugee crisis, and I absolutely give them credit for doing that. But the sharing economy is not really where we are now, because increasingly we are dealing with a fast-growing industry that is highly commercialised and operating at scale. For example, a report in 2020 found that just 12.5% of Airbnb's revenue came from the kind of home sharing let that was its original concept. In the face of that, we must take action to manage the sector constructively but effectively.

Three key themes now lead to the pressing need for action, including registration of the sector so that we know who is letting property, where they are letting it, and for how long. The first concerns the impact on housing supply—that is, places for people to actually live. It is clear that the short let tourist accommodation sector is now dominated by whole property lettings in many areas, including owners with multi-property listings. That suggests a significant shift into that market by individuals and businesses who would otherwise be in the residential lettings market, or making property available for sale.

Before the covid-19 pandemic, Westminster—my borough—had the highest proportion of entire homes listed on online short lettings sites, currently standing at 13,039. In his research, academic Tom Simcock of Edge Hill University found there had been a 423% increase in the number of multi-host entire apartment lettings between 2015 and 2019. That equates to just over 4,400 properties in London alone being let by hosts with multiple listings. Nearly four out of every five lettings in my borough were for whole homes, with a similar figure for Kensington, and more than 60% in Camden and Hammersmith.

[Ms Karen Buck]

Four out every 10 hosts in my borough listed multiple properties, with the numbers nearly as high in Camden and Brent.

This is, of course, a national issue, although some of the rules on planning permission requirements vary between London and the rest of the country. The House of Commons Library briefing from a few weeks ago referred to a 661% growth in short lets in Cornwall over just five years, and colleagues in towns and cities across the country, from York to Cambridge and from Plymouth to the Lake district, recognise that pattern. What it means in practice is that an ever growing share of properties in a number of locations are unavailable for anyone to live in. No one planned that, or discussed what the implications might be, but it has happened.

The second theme concerns the near impossibility of enforcing the rules that exist. The deregulation of London's holiday let market from 2015 onwards not only made it substantially easier to let out property on that basis, but made the task of monitoring and managing breaches of the rules harder and costlier for local councils. There is ample evidence that some hosts have engaged in routine short-term letting for longer than the 90 nights a year permitted in London, despite Airbnb's introduction of a 90-day limit on its platform. The BBC has been among those investigating the extent to which agencies and landlords have bypassed the controls introduced by Airbnb to deliberately flout the 90-night limit and engage in short-term letting activity above 90 nights without planning permission. Research carried out for the Greater London Authority estimated that more than 11,000 properties were let in breach of London's 90-day-a-year rule, yet in 2019-20 my borough of Westminster issued only 49 enforcement notices.

Local authorities across London—and, I am sure, across other parts of the country—both Labour and Conservative, have faced significant challenges with the funding and technology needed effectively to regulate and enforce measures against short-term landlords in breach of the rules. London councils, the Mayor of London, and local authorities elsewhere, are left to pick up the pieces, spending scarce resources and frustrating residents who bring forward complaints about which local authorities are unable to take any action. Currently, more than 2,000 live short-term lets are being monitored by Westminster City Council alone for suspected breaches of the rules.

That leads to the third dimension of this issue, which is the extent to which short-term and holiday lets can contribute to nuisance, thereby requiring local agencies, from the police to local authorities, to devote time and money to responding on behalf of neighbours. Such nuisance can include, as my own council has indicated, crime and antisocial behaviour, prostitution, noisy parties, housing benefit fraud and drugs trafficking. Indeed, there is a growing consensus that there is a serious problem with criminality at the bottom end of the short let market. Excessive quantities of commercial waste are generated, which is often misclassified as domestic waste and not paid for. Another issue is regular unlicensed music events and noise. In the first six months of 2021, during lockdown, the council identified 83 short lets purely as a consequence of their being locations for unlicensed music events.

Unsurprisingly, the leader of Conservative-controlled Westminster—so this is a cross-party point—says that “irresponsible short-term lets are making life hell for residents and causing a strain on council resources”.

My own casework confirms that. Residents in apartments and mansion blocks describe noise, nuisance and security fears as the place they used to call home now bears all the characteristics of a hotel, but with none of the safeguards.

Finally, the growth of the short-term let industry has created an uneven playing field in the hospitality sector, with traditional providers such as hotels required to bear the costs of business rates and corporation tax, and comply with regulations, not least in respect of health and safety, whereas short-term let owners do not. My own council points to one striking example: before the pandemic, Park West apartments close to Hyde Park had more rooms available for short-term letting than exist in the whole of the Ritz hotel. The Ritz hotel pays £2.27 million in business rates annually. The combined council tax bill of the Park West apartments that we know are used for short-term lettings is £92,686.

Here we are, seven years after the deregulation of the sector in London—five years after I last introduced a Bill to encourage regulation—and with a generally deregulated sector in the rest of the country, but still no action from the Government. We are promised a consultation on a registration scheme, but we need action. I stress again that I do not want a ban, because there are proven positives to short lets in respect of personal incomes and local economies, but we need a registration scheme so that everyone letting out their property in this way can be identified, and the minority with tenants with problematic behaviours can be held easily to account. As the Mayor of London has proposed, such a scheme would need to be nationwide and mandatory, to track properties being let across platforms, and to require proof of ownership and proper identification of the letting landlord. Those are not onerous requirements but they would make a significant difference.

Requiring all landlords to be registered in order to provide short-term lets would make recourse to justice easier for victims of crime. If the criminal landlord was not on the register, they would already be on the back foot. It would help ensure councils could monitor breaches of the rules and act swiftly to deal with noise, waste and other nuisance. We have waited too long for a response to this growing problem, and the Government need to act now.

3.47 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I do not oppose the right of the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) to introduce a Bill because I would defend that right to the utmost, but I wish to show solidarity with the people who are the targets of her Bill—those small businesses that engage in providing much needed holiday and short-term let accommodation. Conservative Members certainly do not intend to allow those businesses to be regulated in the way that she suggests.

Earlier today, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor spoke eloquently in the spring statement about the importance of deregulation and the reduction of burdens on small businesses. The hon. Lady's proposals call for yet more regulation and interference in a whole sector of small businesses that provide short and holiday let

accommodation. The deregulated sector, as she was prepared to admit, responded flexibly and imaginatively to the covid-19 crisis, and that was because it was deregulated—it was free and flexible to do what was needed in the circumstances. Under the regulation she would like, that would not have been possible. When people were deprived of the opportunity of taking holidays abroad, the supply of accommodation in constituencies such as mine would not have expanded in the way that it did to meet the demand.

Small landlords are already fearful that the Government are intent on creating a national register of landlords, going back on previous assurances given to the House by a series of Housing Ministers—most recently the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler) when she was a Housing Minister. She and other Ministers before her said that a national register of accommodation would be an unnecessary and costly additional layer of bureaucracy that would do nothing to improve the quality or quantity of such accommodation.

The hon. Member for Westminster North referred to what has been happening in the residential lettings market. It is quite clear that because of fears that the Government are going to introduce more controls in the residential lettings market, a lot of people have moved away from residential shorthold leases. They are fearful that the Government will effectively give retrospective security of tenure to people who entered into agreements to occupy that accommodation on the basis that the landlord could recover possession under section 21.

What are the unintended consequences of what the Government are already threatening to do? They are that the people who are adversely affected by that potential regulation are themselves switching to providing alternative accommodation. Instead of having an additional supply of rented accommodation available for those who want to use it, we are now finding that much more of the supply of rented accommodation is going towards holiday and short-term lets. That is a direct consequence, in my submission, of the senseless regulation that was brought in by the Government and of the threat of further regulation.

It is a principle that bad regulation begets the need for further regulation to deal with the situation that arose because of unintended consequences and good will. The hon. Lady and I served as officers on the all-party parliamentary group for the private rented sector. There is much we share in common about the need to deal with rogue landlords and so on, but I think we disagree about the best means of achieving that. How ironic, therefore, that her proposals suggest that local authorities should be given an additional burden and responsibility, when they cannot even cope with the existing burdens and responsibilities that this House, in much legislation, has placed on them.

We already have a scandal not just in the private rented sector but in the social rented sector. Council houses owned by local authorities have been let to

people who then sub-let them with impunity, thereby effectively taking them out of the social housing market. We also have a situation—it certainly extends to my constituency—where there are no council-owned properties but there are housing association-owned properties and the condition of quite a lot of those properties is a disgrace. The local authority does nothing to enforce against that. Local authorities cannot even cope with the current burden of regulation. The hon. Lady says there is an issue about enforcement. There will certainly be even more of an issue about enforcement.

In the end, the hon. Lady's Bill will be an attack on good, responsible citizens and small businesses who are trying to help meet a need by providing the short let and holiday accommodation she describes. I am glad she praised Airbnb, because so many of our constituents benefit from going to Airbnb properties, both in this country and abroad. Those properties are now introducing more competition into this important sector. I do not wish to divide the House, as that would be a pointless exercise. We have finished all Friday business for this Session, but the hon. Lady will be able to bring in her Bill in the next Session. If she does, I look forward to opposing it vehemently.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Ms Karen Buck, Nickie Aiken, Tim Farron, Rachael Maskell, Lucy Powell, Matthew Pennycook, Tulip Siddiq, Daniel Zeichner, Fleur Anderson, Luke Pollard and Andy Slaughter present the Bill.

Ms Karen Buck accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May, and to be printed (Bill 290).

COMMERCIAL RENT (CORONAVIRUS) BILL: PROGRAMME (NO. 3)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 24 November 2021 (Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill (Programme)) as varied by the Order of 12 January 2022 (Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(Steve Double.)

Question agreed to.

Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Financial privilege is not engaged by any of the Lords amendments.

Clause 2

“RENT” AND “BUSINESS TENANCY”

3.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this we may take Lords amendments 2 to 20.

Paul Scully: Before I speak to the Lords amendments, I thank the shadow Ministers—the hon. Members for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury)—for their constructive and positive engagement during the Bill’s passage through the House. I have been pleased with the support for the Bill across both Houses. The Government made several amendments in the other place to ensure that the Bill is as useful as it can be. To that end, I believe that Members across this House will support the amendments.

I will begin with the Lords amendments that were introduced following extensive engagement with the Welsh Government; I am grateful for their positive and thoughtful discussions about the Bill. Lords amendments 1, 3, 4, 6 to 8, 10, 15 and 17 were introduced to allow Welsh Ministers to have rightful control over devolved matters.

Lords amendment 1 defines Welsh and English business tenancies to allow the Bill to distinguish between business tenancies in later provisions.

Lords amendment 3 clarifies that the power to extend the time limit for making a reference to arbitration could be exercised separately for English or Welsh business tenancies, as well as for both.

Lords amendment 4 removes a definition that is redundant due to Lords amendment 6 to clause 23.

Lords amendments 6 and 7 decouple the moratorium period from the period for making a reference to arbitration. They provide that the moratorium period will end six months from Royal Assent unless extended.

Lords amendment 8 inserts a new clause that means that the consent of Welsh Ministers would be needed to extend the moratorium period for Welsh businesses in respect of devolved matters.

On the power in clause 28—which was previously clause 27—to reapply the Act, Lords amendment 10 enables regulations under the clause to be made just for English or Welsh business tenancies, as well as for both.

Lords amendment 15 requires the consent of Welsh Ministers to exercise the power to reapply devolved provisions in relation to Welsh business tenancies.

Lords amendment 17 inserts a new clause that provides that Welsh Ministers can use the power in clause 28 concurrently with the Secretary of State insofar as it relates to the reapplication, in respect of Welsh business tenancies, of devolved provisions—that is, certain moratorium provisions.

Following those amendments, I am pleased to say that the Senedd has agreed a legislative consent motion, for which I thank them wholeheartedly.

Separately, I thank the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee for its consideration of the Bill. The Committee raised concerns about clause 28, which, as I said, was previously clause 27. The clause provides that the Act can be reapplied if there are further closure requirements due to coronavirus.

The Committee’s concerns were about the breadth of the power and the potential for significant alterations to be made for a reapplication. In response, Lords amendments 12 to 16 were introduced to limit the power’s breadth. As a result, the power would still allow for targeted modifications in order to accommodate new dates and make adjustments to moratorium provisions to take account of new timeframes. However, the amended power could not be used to change the operation of the arbitration process or policy.

I am sure that Members will agree that the Committee’s points are important and will be reassured by the appropriate limitations.

Lords amendment 11 ensures that the power can be used in respect of closure requirements imposed after the protected period set out in the Bill, whether that is before or after the Bill is enacted and whether or not the closure requirement has ended when regulations are made. It ensures that the power will be clear and robust for any new waves of coronavirus. Along with Lords amendment 9, it also ensures that the language of clause 27 is consistent with that of clause 4.

We have continued to listen to stakeholder concerns. When the Bill was in the other place, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors gave useful feedback relating to the exercise of the arbitration bodies’ functions to remove arbitrators on the grounds provided for in the Bill. The Arbitration Act 1996 gives arbitration bodies immunity from liability in relation to the function of appointing arbitrators; arbitration bodies were concerned that under the Bill they did not have explicit immunity from liability in relation to the function of removing them. In response, Lords amendment 18 clarifies that approved arbitration bodies have immunity from incurring liability for anything done in exercise of the function of removing arbitrators under the Bill, unless the act is shown to be committed in bad faith.

4 pm

Similarly, we introduced Lords amendments 5, 19 and 20 as a result of stakeholder feedback submitted via written evidence to the Public Bill Committee. I am grateful to those who submitted evidence, as well as those who took the time to give oral evidence. Lords amendment 5 expressly sets out the effect of an arbitration award under the Bill, including how it affects the liability of the tenant and of a guarantor or former tenant. Lords amendments 19 and 20 are minor amendments to schedules 2 and 3 that clarify the application of certain provisions to former tenants and guarantors, including where an indemnity was given.

Lords amendment 2 is also a clarificatory amendment. It confirms that an obligation to close either the premises or the business at a certain time is regarded as a closure requirement.

I am grateful for the support that the Bill has received. Tomorrow, if the Bill receives Royal Assent, the measures that have affected the commercial property sector for

more than two years will come to an end. I will be pleased to see the measures in the Bill play their part in encouraging a return to normal market operation. To that end, I urge the House to agree with the Lords amendments.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for the chance to raise issues with him earlier. I also thank colleagues in this House and the other place, as well as staff and all those who gave evidence to the Public Bill Committee.

As the Opposition have laid out here and in the other place, Labour has consistently recognised the need for a fair arbitration process to deal with the significant commercial rent arrears that have accrued during the pandemic. Our amendments were intended to strengthen and clarify the legislation, so that the new regime can be effective, accessible and affordable, and can fairly balance the interests of landlords and tenants.

Throughout the Bill's passage, we have been clear that no otherwise viable business should face an overwhelming burden as a result of rent arrears that threaten its future. Likewise, commercial landlords must have access to clear mechanisms for recouping appropriate levels of arrears. The guiding principles in the process must ultimately be fairness for landlords and tenants alike, and the long-term interests of British businesses and jobs. I pay tribute to the landlords and tenants who have not waited for the Bill to make it to the statute book, but have used the time to work together in good faith in order to come to an agreement.

We should be clear that commercial rent arrears are just one of the challenges that many businesses face. With today's announcement that inflation is at a 30-year high, many firms up and down our country face a cost-of-doing-business crisis. Labour recognises how difficult the past two years have been for businesses up and down the country. Sectors of our economy such as aviation, live events, travel and tourism have been hit particularly hard.

The Lords amendments, which are all Government amendments, help to clarify the Bill. In our view, they also give appropriate powers to the Welsh Government; we know that discussions were undertaken. The amendments improve the Bill and we support them all, but there are still a number of areas on which I would welcome clarity and assurances from the Minister on how the Government will move forward.

First, we continue to be concerned that the Bill contains no limits on the costs of arbitration. We cannot let high arbitration fees, or concerns that fees will be prohibitive, deter landlords and tenants from using the processes established under the Bill to achieve a fair solution. That would be a failure of policy and of planning.

We have previously called for a cap on fees, but the Government did not accept that proposal. I note that the Minister in the other place said a cap could be imposed if there was evidence that it was needed, but I should be grateful if this Minister would specify his intentions in that regard. Will he update the House on when guidance on the costs of the arbitration process will be published? Will he also confirm that Lords amendment 18—which relates to schedule 1—effectively

limits the liability of the arbitral bodies in the discharging of their duties under the Bill, which is what I understood from his comments?

Ensuring the quality of arbitration is important, and we have consistently called for the Government to explain how they will ensure that there are sufficient numbers of arbitrators to handle the volumes of cases under the scheme. What discussions has the Minister had with the arbitral bodies on their capacity, and on maintaining a sufficient number of arbitrators with the necessary skills and experience, and what quality assurance does he expect will be in place? It is important to have reassurances on these issues, especially in view of the limitation of liability that we have put into the Bill.

Finally on this issue, let me say that the arbitration process will not carry confidence unless the decisions are demonstrably fair and there is consistency of assessment. The Minister will know that business organisations had particular concerns about how the “viability of the business” would be established. Viability is referred to in some of the draft guidance published in February, but what review has the Minister undertaken of that guidance with stakeholders, and when will he finalise the guidance that will accompany the Act?

Let me turn briefly to the detail of the Lords amendments. The Bill, which applies largely to England and Wales, confers a number of powers on the Secretary of State in respect of Wales. Lords amendments 1, 3 and 10 are designed to ensure that different provisions can be made in relation to Welsh and English business tenancies. Lords amendment 3 clarifies that the power to extend the time limit for arbitration can be exercised separately for English and Welsh businesses, which is an improvement, while Lords amendment 10 allows the Secretary of State to reapply the Act to both England and Wales, or to just one of the nations.

Similarly, Lords amendments 4, 6 to 8 and 17 give Wales increased powers to extend the moratorium period, which is the period in which tenants have protection against enforcement action by the landlord in relation to covid rent arrears. This must, of course, be a process that works for both England and Wales, but also, looking at the Bill overall, for Scotland and Northern Ireland, in so far as there are limited provisions that apply to those nations.

Lords amendment 8 inserts a new clause requiring the Welsh Government to consent to any extension of the moratorium period for Welsh business tenancies under clause 23. It states that this moratorium period must be the same length as the arbitration period. Lords amendments 6 and 7 allow for the new clause specified in Lords amendment 8 by proposing that the current moratorium period should be six months long, rather than being tied to the arbitration period. This change allows for different moratorium periods to apply in England and Wales. We support those changes because we recognise that the Welsh Government should have a say in the extension of the moratorium period in Wales.

Lords amendments 12 to 14 were tabled in response to the report by the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee. Lords amendment 12 removes the Government's power to specify certain parts of the legislation that would not apply if the Bill itself were reapplied. Previously, the Minister would have had the power to pick and choose which parts of the Bill were reintroduced or reapplied, but Lords amendment 13

[Seema Malhotra]

ensures that the Government can make modifications to a reapplication of the Bill only if they are “necessary”. That is important for the role of Parliament and the Welsh Senedd.

Lords amendment 15 allows the Minister to reapply the Bill in Wales only with the consent of the Welsh Government. Lords amendment 14 allows different provisions to be made in England and Wales during reapplication. Labour supports these amendments, and it is important that the Government have listened to the concerns of the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, which is a respected voice on these matters.

We are also pleased to see Lords amendments 5 and 19, which ensure that neither the tenant nor guarantors nor previous tenants are liable for any protected rent debt that an arbitrator has cancelled. Similarly, Lords amendment 20 ensures that neither the tenant nor guarantors nor previous tenants can be subject to winding-up petitions or bankruptcy orders for protected rent during the moratorium period. On Second Reading, I raised Labour’s concerns about ensuring that not only tenants but anyone liable for their rent are protected during the moratorium period, so I am pleased that these amendments support that protection.

Lords amendment 2 ensures that the provisions in clause 4, specifying closure requirements, apply to the closure of businesses and premises. On Third Reading, I raised concerns that businesses that no longer occupied the premises—because, for example, the pandemic had made a particular location unprofitable—would not be able to access the arbitration process. We are pleased to see this amendment, which ensures that the Bill explicitly allows such businesses to benefit from the provisions in this legislation.

In conclusion, the Lords amendments make some important changes to the Bill. They rightly increase the powers of the Welsh Government over this legislation, provide appropriate constitutional limits to the Government’s powers on reapplying the Bill, and ensure that tenants, guarantors and previous tenants are all protected during the moratorium period. However, the Minister should provide further assurances in connection with these amendments—for example, on the cost of the arbitration process, and on ensuring that arbitrators apply the measures consistently across cases. Nevertheless, Labour supports all the Lords amendments. We support the Bill’s passage to Royal Assent and look forward to its implementation as soon as possible.

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution today, and for the way in which she has engaged with me and the Bill team. I also thank other Members across the House for their contributions. The Bill’s passage through both Houses has been a positive and collaborative process, and that is testament to its importance in supporting businesses in recovering from the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. The amendments made in the other place were made for good reason and will serve only to improve the Bill. Let me spend a couple of minutes trying to answer the questions that she has rightly and understandably raised.

The hon. Lady talked about the cost of arbitration. We want to ensure, as best we can, that arbitration fees are predictable and affordable. We have discussed this at

length at various stages of the Bill, with good reason. The Bill aims to support both tenants and landlords in resolving rent debt, and it is therefore important that the scheme remains affordable and accessible. Approved arbitration bodies will have the function of setting arbitration fees, and they have the expertise to set them at a level that will ensure that the scheme is affordable while also incentivising arbitrators to deliver the scheme in good time. In the interests of transparency and accessibility, the bodies must publish the details of the arbitration fees on their websites, so that the applicant will know in advance how much it will cost to go to arbitration.

We will monitor the affordability of the scheme by engaging regularly with arbitration bodies, as well as with tenants and landlords. We will be able to judge how things are going by those early cases going through the process. The Secretary of State has the power to cap fees, should they become unaffordable. That power can be used where necessary, but it cannot be used prematurely, because we do not want to reduce the number of arbitrators available to act, thereby risking the delivery of the scheme.

The hon. Lady talked about guidance on costs and the viability of businesses. I assured the House that we would bring forward guidance for arbitrators, and we are looking to expedite that, so that it happens within a couple of weeks of the Bill receiving Royal Assent. I am pleased to say that we have published the draft guidance, which is on the Government website, in order to gather feedback from the arbitrators. That addresses viability clearly by setting out a non-exhaustive list of evidence that an arbitrator could have regard to in assessing viability. The final version of the guidance will be published shortly after Royal Assent. Viability is deliberately not defined, because of the vast array of different business models, both within and between sectors.

4.15 pm

The hon. Lady raised questions about Lords amendment 18 and the immunity from liability for arbitration bodies. Let me confirm that Lords amendment 18 seeks to achieve consistency between the Bill’s function of removing arbitrators and that of appointing arbitrators. It ensures that arbitration bodies are immune from liability for the proper exercise of the function of removing arbitrators, just as they already are under the Arbitration Act 1996 for appointing arbitrators. I repeat that the amendment does not afford immunity from liability if arbitration bodies exercise their functions in bad faith. She has often asked how the quality, skills and experience of arbitrators will be ensured. Clearly, we want to make sure that this scheme is delivered in good time by skilled and capable arbitrators. So the method of approval that we have devised ensures that the scheme is high quality. The bodies must be approved by the Secretary of State. Only bodies considered suitable to carry out the Bill’s functions will be approved. The Secretary of State has a power to withdraw approval from a body that is no longer suitable. Approved arbitration bodies will maintain a list of arbitrators to carry out the scheme. The bodies have a statutory duty only to list and appoint arbitrators who are suitable by virtue of their qualifications and experience.

Finally, the hon. Lady talked about whether there are sufficient numbers of arbitrators and arbitration bodies. Capacity is a key concern, because we want to make

sure that this scheme can go through as quickly as possible, to give the landlords and tenants the certainty they need to proceed with economic recovery. So we will work with arbitration bodies to monitor and manage capacity. Following the intelligence from a similar scheme in New South Wales, in Australia, we believe that the central estimate of cases is now 2,800 in England and Wales, which is a significant reduction from the previous estimate we had of 7,500. I hope that goes some way to reassuring her about the capacity of the market. Clearly, we have also discussed how to manage capacity with the arbitral bodies. We have further developed our post-implementation review plan, which sets out how we will engage with stakeholders and collect data which will alert us to issues with capacity, should any arise.

I hope that that has answered the hon. Lady's questions and that that puts us in good stead to get Royal Assent, so that we can crack on to get the tenants and landlords the certainty that they want. I commend these Lords amendments to the House.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 20 agreed to.

Energy

4.17 pm

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): I beg to move,

That the draft Boiler Upgrade Scheme (England and Wales) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 22 February, be approved.

The UK is the first major economy in the world to set a legally binding target to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. We are continuing to advance sustainability through the Prime Minister's "Ten Point Plan", the net zero strategy, and the heat and buildings strategy. Currently, heating buildings and industry is responsible for 21% of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions. Decarbonisation of heat is recognised as one of the biggest challenges in meeting our climate targets. The Government's ambition is to phase out the installation of new natural gas boilers beyond 2035. Heat pumps are a proven scalable option for decarbonising heat and will play a substantial role in any net zero scenario. A UK market with the capacity and capability to deploy 600,000 heat pumps per year by 2028 can keep us on track to net zero. However, the current UK market for low-carbon heat is relatively small and, due to that, these technologies are largely unable to compete on a capital cost basis with conventional heating options. Subsidy is required to mobilise and grow the market, and to bridge the cost gap between fossil fuel and low-carbon systems. The low-carbon heat market has been supported by the domestic renewable heat incentive, which will close to new applications next week, on 31 March 2022.

The boiler upgrade scheme will succeed that scheme, providing capital grants to support the installation of heat pumps and biomass boilers in homes and small non-domestic buildings in England and Wales. The scheme has a budget of £450 million over three years, as confirmed at the 2021 spending review. Grants of £5,000 will be provided for air source heat pumps and biomass boilers, and of £6,000 for ground source heat pumps. Biomass boilers will be eligible only in rural properties that are not connected to the gas grid, to minimise air quality impacts.

The application process will be installer-led and comprise two stages: applying for and redeeming a voucher. This will allow for a simple consumer journey, while maintaining certainty for installers about the availability of budget. To ensure consumer protection through the scheme, consumer consent will be sought as part of the application process. All participating installers must be certified by the microgeneration certification scheme or equivalent, and must confirm membership of a consumer code. That ensures that consumers are covered by schemes governing the products and their performance, as well as the quality of the installation and service they receive from the installer.

The scheme will support up to 30,000 installations in year 1, contributing 2.6 megatonnes of CO₂ equivalent of carbon savings, and supporting 2,100 direct full-time equivalent and 1,800 indirect full-time equivalent jobs per annum over its lifetime. This supports the Government's ambitions for levelling up, as we expect supply chains to be built and jobs to be supported across the regions. With the growth in demand encouraged under the scheme and wider market developments, we expect to

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see cost reductions in the technologies over the three years. This instrument therefore sets out a provision to allow the Secretary of State to review and adjust grant levels in response to market changes.

Eligible low-carbon heating systems commissioned on or after 1 May 2022 will be entitled to support under the scheme. From 11 April 2022, installers will be able to open an account for the scheme with Ofgem. We expect the draft regulations to come into force and for grant applications to open by 23 May 2022.

The scheme established by this statutory instrument will increase deployment of low-carbon heating technologies, making crucial progress towards our climate targets. Investing in this scheme will reduce our exposure to volatile prices and protect British consumers. It will also grow the retrofit market, put downward pressure on costs and expand the supply chain ahead of the introduction of regulations and market-based approaches later in the decade.

4.22 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): There is a great deal of agreement between us this afternoon on a number of the issues that the Minister raised about the role that heat pumps will play in the future low-carbon energy economy, including how many heat pumps we will need over the period. We need to ensure that as we transition away from heating systems predominantly run by gas—and in the domestic environment, by boilers—we can look forward to substantial replacement of those high-carbon heating measures by the low-carbon heating arrangements offered by heat pumps.

I hope hon. Members will bear in mind a very important figure that the Minister mentioned: 600,000 heat pumps a year to be installed by 2028. That figure derives from the Prime Minister's "Ten Point Plan" and is an ambition for the number of installations that we should reach, which will continue after that point at 600,000 or so a year. That, among other things, will get us more or less in line with what the Climate Change Committee has suggested on the roll-out of heat pumps to ensure that our heat decarbonisation targets are realised. That is therefore a key figure, and it should be the yardstick against which this measure is judged.

We heard from the Minister that this is a £450 million scheme—£150 million per annum over three years. That is, by the way, a slight uprating from the initial consultation on what was the clean heat grant and now is the boiler upgrade scheme. However, that is what we have in the pot over the next three years for the installation of heat pumps. By fairly simple arithmetic, that translates—if we assume that the amount of grant per heat pump installation is £5,000—to about 30,000 heat pumps per year for those three years. That is 90,000 heat pumps installed under the scheme by the year 2025 so. So we then have three years to get another 500,000 or so heat pumps installed by 2028-29. On the basis of the report I mentioned, that is just not going to happen. Even if we assume that a number of heat pumps will be otherwise installed in new build properties—this scheme is predominantly about existing properties that can be retrofitted with heat pumps—we can see just how far from the stated ambition this scheme leaves us over this period.

I am not kicking against the scheme as it stands, because it is good that we have some underwriting for heat pumps, but it is woefully inadequate for the task that we have ahead of us. It will get us nowhere near the target figure that I mentioned, and I think we should at least quadruple the scheme to get us on a trajectory that will actually get us to the 600,000 heat pump installations we have been talking about.

However, I am afraid that it gets worse for the scheme as it stands. As the Minister mentioned, the scheme is not just for heat pumps; it is also for biomass boilers—all of that is to be included in that £450 million cash limit. Unless no boilers are installed under the scheme, there will be quite a lot fewer than 30,000 heat pumps installed per year under the scheme.

Of course, the cost of Ofgem administration of the scheme—£10 million a year—is also included in the cash limit. By the way, I am glad that the Government have decided to curtail their interest in Canadian consultancies for energy efficiency schemes and to go with Ofgem as the administrator and manager of this scheme. However, I do wonder who will be responsible for regulating and reporting on the progress of the scheme. I think it may well be Ofgem, so I will be interested to see how that potential circularity plays out in how the scheme proceeds.

Furthermore, the money for the scheme is not new. The scheme replaces the domestic renewable heat incentive scheme. The Government have trumpeted how the scheme is going to turbocharge the installation of heat pumps, sort out supply chains and various other things, but it is essentially trying to do that with no new money at all. The RHI was based not on a levy but on taxpayer funding, and there was a line in the Red Book that allocated RHI funding historically. What was that line? Well, the cost of domestic RHI last year was £150 million—exactly what is available each year for this new scheme. In other words, the same amount of money is being turned over to carry out the same sort of activity that the RHI did. It is only that, as a result of £5,000 grants, we will apparently get far more heat pumps. It was not that the RHI did not support heat pumps—it did, and it also supported biomass boilers and solar thermal, which is not included in this scheme. The scheme also does not include hybrid heat pumps, which could make a real difference in terms of heating off-grid properties.

The interesting figures for installations in 2019-20 under the RHI were 10,400 air source heat pumps, 1,175 ground source heat pumps, and small numbers of biomass boilers and solar thermal systems—in other words, 11,500 heat pumps from a similar level of funding. I wonder whether the Government are as confident as they make out that we can do so much better than those numbers, even assuming that we get near to 30,000 heat pumps in the scheme, from the same amount of money as the renewable heat incentive.

I also question whether it is a good idea to pursue heat pumps in the way that this scheme is doing without having a concomitant drive to uprate the energy efficiency of properties that are likely to be concerned with the installation of heat pumps. That is not an issue with new house building, because new houses are likely to have good enough energy efficiency to take a heat pump, but I am sure that the Minister will be aware that heat pumps simply do not work very well in poorly

insulated homes, as they struggle to get the house up to its required background temperature if their long-term slow input is continually leaking out due to the energy efficiency of the property.

The predominant Government scheme for energy efficiency at the moment is the energy company obligation. ECO is moving very shortly from ECO3 to ECO4 at a similar sized budget to when it started—ECO3 at £750 million and ECO4 at £1.2 billion. That was the amount of money that was in ECO when it was first started, so the money in the ECO fund is also standing still. That fund also needs quadrupling in size in order to run alongside the proposal we are discussing, so that whole-house treatments can work for heat pumps. ECO4 also needs putting into general taxation—or at least the difference between the original budget and its new budget, so that the two schemes can work well alongside each other.

Finally, I have a small point concerning the run-on from the renewable heat incentive into the boiler upgrade scheme. The Minister mentioned the timetable by which the new scheme will come into place. At present, it looks as though there will be quite a hiatus, as no new orders under the RHI will be taken and they will effectively stop until the boiler upgrade process—the vouchers, the certification and various other things—comes in. We could lose up to six months of heat pump installation and face various other problems due to that dislocation, with the two schemes not running together seamlessly. It is also pretty bad for installers' order books to have that hiatus in their order books between their activities under RHI and what they think they may be doing under the new boiler upgrade scheme.

The scheme should come in seamlessly alongside the phasing out of the RHI. I do not know whether the Minister considers it too late to look at running on the RHI a little bit until the new scheme is in place, so that it can have the maximum impact from the word go as it comes in and takes over.

However, as I have said, we will not be opposing this measure this afternoon because of the high degree of agreement that we have on the purpose of the scheme. What we do not particularly agree with the Government on is their low-key response to the imperative of getting those 600,000 heat pumps in by the end of the decade. It apparently remains low-key in this scheme. I would be happy to hear from the Minister if he has other plans to get us further up to date with heat pumps in the future, but at the moment that seems not to be the case.

4.34 pm

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) for his constructive approach and his overall support for the scheme, which is most welcome.

I will deal with some of the points the hon. Gentleman raised. He is right on his first point: the ambition is to have 600,000 installations per annum from 2028. He is also right that there is £450 million allocated to the scheme over three years. It is a £5,000 grant, so he is right that that is a projected 30,000 grants per annum. I think his question, if I may repeat it, is how we get from 30,000 to 600,000 in the intervening three years between the end of the scheme and the start of the target. I think he asserted that that would not happen, so let me try to reassure him. The idea of the 600,000 figure, as I think

he knows, is not that the Government will come along in 2028 and provide 600,000 heat pumps per annum; the idea of the scheme for the next three years is to pump-prime the private sector to be able to provide the alternative that we need.

So far, the private sector has responded well. Some companies have said that they welcome the Government grant scheme that is coming in and believe it is enough to allow them to bring down the cost of heat pumps to greater equivalence with conventional heating systems over that time. We believe, therefore, that we are putting in the right amount of funding, while being prudent with public finances, to provide enough support to help us to get to that 600,000 per annum target in 2028.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether biomass boilers were also within the costings. They are, but we expect the number of biomass boilers to be relatively low. We expect the vast majority of the funding to go on heat pumps. He asked about the regulation of the scheme, and he is correct to assert that it will be up to Ofgem to oversee the scheme and the market. I would add that installers also need to be certified under the microgeneration certification scheme.

On the domestic renewable heat incentive, the hon. Gentleman is right that the scheme is closing to new applications next week, on 31 March, as I laid out earlier. It has been a successful scheme: up to January, 100,398 low-carbon installations had been successfully installed due to the DRHI.

The scheme has helped both to raise consumer awareness and understanding of low-carbon technologies, and to raise the quality of low-carbon heating installations, protecting consumers and improving their experiences. It has also supported the development of both product and installer supply chains. We believe that the boiler upgrade scheme will provide a simpler offer than the previous DRHI, and the grant model will directly address the up-front capital cost of low-carbon heat technologies, which is cited as a key barrier to deployment.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether heat pumps were effective in cases where properties are less well insulated. I can tell him that current evidence suggests that heat pumps are technically suitable for most buildings; around 90% have sufficient energy efficiency and internal electrical connection capacity to accommodate a heat pump system, which is encouraging.

I think the hon. Gentleman asked about the gap between the end of the previous scheme at the end of this month and this scheme coming into place in May. We consider that a staggered approach, with installer accounts created in April and applications starting in May, will offer the best overall level of service to installers and ensure that applications can be processed promptly. Installations commissioned from 1 April will be eligible for funding, subject to the other eligibility requirements being met. I hope I have answered all his questions; if there is anything I have missed, he can contact me afterwards and I am happy to write to him.

Heat pumps will play a substantial role in any net zero scenario, so we need to build the market for them now. This targeted support will help to grow the low-carbon heat supply chain to enable the proposed introduction of regulatory and market-based measures in the mid-2020s. Not only will investment in the scheme contribute to carbon reduction targets and increase consumer awareness

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of low-carbon heating solutions, but the creation of high-quality jobs will help with boosting the economic recovery, levelling up across the country and ensuring that we build back better. I urge the House to support this measure.

Question put and agreed to.

PETITION

Devil's Point and Firestone Bay

4.39 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Devil's Point and Firestone bay are beautiful places to swim. As a keen wild swimmer myself, I have enjoyed swimming there many times. Given the ongoing sewage crisis, we need to make this an official bathing water so that we can be assured that it is safe, with regular water testing. The petition has been signed by 213 people in hard copy and by another 743 online.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport,

Declares that Devil's Point and Firestone Bay in Plymouth is a beautiful stretch of coastline that is of great public benefit to the local community and is frequently used to swim in; further that as it is not classed as a bathing water it does not meet the stricter environmental standards that it should; and further that it should be classed as a bathing water by summer 2022, with testing on water quality conducted all throughout the year.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to support the campaign for Devil's Point and Firestone Bay in Plymouth to be classified as a bathing water, and for the Environment Agency to designate this without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002723]

Bradford City of Culture Bid

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Miss Dines.)

4.41 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be granted this Adjournment debate. I am proud to be able to speak today in support of Bradford's bid to become the UK city of culture 2025.

Ask anyone who has lived in Bradford or spent any length of time there what they think about the district, and they will tell you of its beauty, its brilliance and its quirks, for there are few places quite like Bradford. They will always rave on about the rich, deep and diverse culture that Bradford has to offer. After all, it was the hills of Bradford that provided not just the home of the Brontë sisters but the backdrop to their novels. It was one of Bradford's sons, David Hockney, who went on to become one of the world's most influential painters. It is Bradford that brought up one fifth of the boy band One Direction, winner of numerous musical awards and accolades—Zayn Malik. It is Bradford that is the site of some of the most stunning architecture you will ever see, such as the Alhambra, St George's Hall, City Hall and the Bradford Odeon, which is finally on the way to being restored. Months spent pestering Ministers have borne fruit and Bradford's iconic Odeon is now well on the way to restoration.

There is also our vibrant TV and film scene, with Bradford becoming the world's first UNESCO city of film in 2009, and with our "streets of heritage" buildings such as City Hall and those in Little Germany being stars in their own right in many historic dramas. One of particular interest, as I found out only this morning, is "Peaky Blinders"—a programme that I have never actually seen but am reliably informed has some resemblance to this place. I cannot confirm or deny that, of course, Mr Deputy Speaker. Our National Science and Media Museum is the home of many treasured collections in the media world and an important part of Bradford city centre.

Nor can we forget the rich sporting culture that Bradford has in spades. Bradford City, winners of the FA cup, albeit a while back in 1911, have some of the most passionate fans you will ever meet. I was on the wrong side of that during the 2017 general election campaign when trying to cajole some of my supporters into a much-needed door-knocking session, only to be told in rather salty language where to go by every single one of them because they would much rather watch the final in which Bradford were partaking—quite rightly, I have to say. Bradford was also key when it comes to the founding of what became the great sport of rugby league. I know that intensely, because my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) is perhaps one of its biggest advocates, and I am convinced she will come in on that point.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend first for securing this debate, and secondly for talking so passionately about our great city of Bradford. I have to say I do not think I am the biggest fan of rugby league in this place, because the biggest fan is Mr Speaker, who is not currently in the Chair. It is fantastic to be here, to intervene in this debate, to

champion the great city of Bradford and to talk about the brilliant and diverse cultural exports that make it the ideal candidate to be the 2025 city of culture. This is a timely debate, because 2025 also marks, importantly, the 130th anniversary of the founding of the Rugby Football Union in the historical heart of God's own county of Yorkshire. I am glad that Mr Speaker is not in the Chair to hear that.

Bradford's rugby league club, the Bradford Bulls, are one of our greatest cultural exports and are known around the globe. Given the return of the Bradford Bulls to Odsal, and the central role they play in our city and our district—not just in my constituency of Bradford South, but right across the UK and internationally—does my hon. Friend agree that the cultural icon of the Bradford Bulls is central to inspiring our local young people, providing exceptional opportunities for our communities and highlighting the essential role that sport and regeneration can play in Bradford's city of culture bid for 2025?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): What an intervention!

Imran Hussain: I am always grateful to my hon. Friend, and she makes some excellent points, which is why it was an excellent intervention. She is absolutely right about the Bradford Bulls, and she continues to be a great champion not only for the district, but for them. The Bulls fell on hard times recently, but they have picked themselves back up, and they continue to be a fierce, resilient team in which the city has a great amount of pride, and I know that my hon. Friend will continue to champion them.

Talking about sport, we cannot forget that it was Richard Dunn who took on the great Muhammad Ali. While he might have lost resoundingly, his legacy lives on in a new generation of boxing stars, from Bobby Vanzie to Tasif Khan, and in the grassroots boxing gyms, which are an important part of our inner-city communities and act as a real hub for people of all ages.

Cricket, rather unsurprisingly, is a popular pastime for people in Bradford, driven by south Asian communities who emigrated to this country and play at a professional level, including Bradford's own Adil Rashid, who plays for the England side. While we may lack turf cricket pitches, which remains a serious issue in the city, many promising cricketers grew up perfecting their game on urban cricket pitches, also known as "the road outside your mum's house when there was no traffic". Many a great star was born on those roadsides.

I cannot get away with talking about Bradford's culture without mentioning our food culture and our love of a good dish, whether it is cooked at home with friends and family or at one of our many outstanding restaurants. Let us be clear: Bradford is the curry capital of Britain, if not Europe, as demonstrated by the fact that Bradford's curry festival is the one to beat. While I have to accept that our near neighbours, including my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), will often try to challenge us for that title, I think even he would accept that it is an utterly ridiculous notion that Leeds would come anywhere near Bradford when it comes to food.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Imran Hussain: I will on the point of food when it comes to Bradford and Leeds.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Here comes the challenge.

Richard Burgon: The biggest and perhaps only disagreement that I and my hon. Friend have had is about whether the best curry houses are in Leeds East or Bradford East. I congratulate him on securing this debate. Although obviously I prefer my home city of Leeds in general, Bradford is a fantastic place, steeped in diversity and culture—everything from the fantastic Waterstones bookshop in that wonderful gothic architecture, to the historic music venue the 1 in 12 Club, to the history of politics in the city. Of course, the Labour party founder, Keir Hardie, stood in a Bradford East by-election. Unlike my hon. Friend, he was not successful—in that sense, at least, my hon. Friend achieved more than Keir Hardie.

Will my hon. Friend accept these congratulations from Leeds in the spirit of breaking down boundaries? Bradford is a fantastic city. As one of its neighbours, I love to visit it, and I wish my hon. Friend and the whole city of Bradford all the very best in their application.

Imran Hussain: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour from Leeds. He is absolutely right. Bradford is the only city in the area—West Yorkshire and slightly further afield—that has been shortlisted, and all the support we have from our near-neighbour cities is very welcome. I thank him for his kind words.

In Bradford, we are slap-bang in the middle of the country, pretty much as far away from the sea as it is possible to be, yet I firmly believe that there is no better place to get a decent plate of fish and chips, whether it is from the award-winning Towngate Fisheries in Idle, Leeds Road Fisheries in the heart of Bradford, one of the other outstanding chippies across the district, or even down at the Eccleshill Mechanics Institute with Terry and the team—I have to confess that that is a secret haunt of mine for lunch.

We sometimes forget that culture means far more for people than just art, sport, film, TV and music; it is something that goes to the very core of who we are as people and communities. That is why I firmly believe that the richness of Bradford's culture is best represented not by our art or even by our heritage but by the diversity of our district. After all, Bradford is one of the most diverse places in the country. We are home to someone from practically every corner of the world who has fled war, persecution or oppression, or simply came here to build a better life.

One of those people was my grandfather, who came to this country 70 years ago, like tens of thousands of others, as part of the generation invited to the UK to rebuild the country after the devastation of the second world war. Like many, he eventually settled here permanently to raise a family of his own. While he maintained his links with Pakistan and Kashmir, as many in the diaspora communities continue to do to this day, it was Bradford, before anywhere else, that was his home.

[Imran Hussain]

While the Pakistani and Kashmiri communities make up a large proportion of Bradford's diversity, we are far from the only minority groups in Bradford. We are home to a sizeable Rohingya community, who fled genocide in Burma—interestingly, it is the largest Rohingya community in the whole of Europe—as well as to Bangladeshi, Indian, Afghan, Kurd, Slovak, Roma and many more communities, which come together like a bouquet of flowers to make Bradford the wonderful place it is.

Historically, Bradford has also had a large Irish population, as well as having been home to European refugees fleeing persecution on the continent, with Little Germany symbolising that historic time. Following the Kindertransport policy of the 1930s, Bradford became the home of many Jewish people who escaped the horrors of the holocaust, including my dear friend Rudi Leavor, who is sadly no longer with us.

Without being too big-headed, let me say that given the national, racial and religious diversity in Bradford, we probably have a claim not just to the title of UK city of culture but to that of real capital of the world. Tragically, some on the far right like to paint this rich diversity as a weakness, but let me be absolutely clear that it is anything but. It is our strength, and perhaps our greatest strength too, because Bradford has always stood united in the face of adversity and stood defiantly in the face of those who seek to divide us. This rich diversity has also given us much to be proud of, as it was these strong, resilient and vibrant communities that saw people from all walks of life—young and old, those of all faiths and none—come together to work together over the last two years to get through some of the most difficult times that we have all ever faced.

Because of our diversity, Bradford is also at the centre of demonstrating to others how to successfully turn integration into a powerful bond between communities, with Bradford Council for Mosques in particular acting not just as one of the leading institutions in the country for Muslims, but as one of the organisations to turn to when working across cultural and religious boundaries to bring people together.

Bradford's welcoming nature is another key strength for our diversity and our culture, as there are no kinder, more generous or more welcoming people than the people of Bradford. Nowhere is this more evident than in our proud status as a city of sanctuary, which I was proud to drive forward in a previous role in Bradford Council, and which means that Bradford will always offer refuge to those fleeing oppression, persecution and injustice from whatever part of the world they come. I strongly believe that the strongest point of Bradford's culture is not the stunning architecture of City Hall or the rolling hills of Brontë country, but the fact that our arms are always open to people from around the world, particularly those fleeing injustice. Consequently, winning the title of UK city of culture 2025 would be a celebration not just of Bradford's culture, but of the positive impact of diversity in our country today.

As the largest mill town in the north of England, Bradford was part of the original northern powerhouse, shipping wool all across the country and indeed all across the world. As a working-class city, our culture—both past and present—is rooted in our history. However, deindustrialisation over the years gone by has not been

kind to cities such as Bradford. Today, we have one of the highest rates of child poverty in the country, with around half of the children growing up in my constituency doing so in homes that face tough choices between heating and eating.

We have rampant health inequalities, which mean that Bradford residents have a higher propensity of preventable diseases such as diabetes, and that we live years less than residents elsewhere. We have poor levels of educational attainment, with children growing up less likely to outperform their peers across the region and elsewhere in the country, and we have widespread insecure, low-paid employment, with people in Bradford paid less for more hours. We have suffered from a decade of austerity and decades more of deindustrialisation, and we have also been forgotten and neglected by successive Governments actually, with the decision to snub Bradford on the Northern Powerhouse Rail line being the most recent glaring example.

Nevertheless, let me be clear: we are not beaten, we are not down and we are certainly not out. As home to one of the youngest, proudest and most vibrant populations in the whole country, we still have a wealth of potential lurking beneath the surface. All we need is that extra little push, which is why winning the title of UK city of culture 2025 would mean everything to Bradford and everything to the people who live there.

Some may consider the title of UK city of culture as just a bit of fun or just a bit of recognition, yet it is much more. As we have seen with past winners—including Hull, just down the M62, which is facing many of the same problems as Bradford—it has been transformative and has put them back on the map for a whole host of positive reasons. These past winners have seen considerable investment over their year of celebration, as well as in the years before and the years after, with increased visitor numbers, greater participation in cultural activities, and new jobs and new skill development opportunities. There has been a lasting legacy; the cities were granted new life and had a refreshed sense of energy.

An independent report has found that Bradford is one of the country's most deprived and left-behind regions, and it has the most to gain from the Government's levelling-up agenda, if that is seen through as promised. If it won the title of city of culture 2025, the impact of the investment that would follow is clear to everyone. I sincerely believe that that point should make things much clearer for the Minister. However, the power of Bradford's bid is not solely in our rich, diverse culture, or in the difference that winning the title of UK city of culture would make; it is also in the strength of the bid. Over the past two years, Bradford has supported a fantastic range of incredible projects, from Summer Unlocked, which hosted a programme of free cultural events including theatre, music, film and more, to the Bradford is #Lit festival, and the fantastic Festival of Lights, which drew more than 20,000 people to a Bradford city square last year. To top it all off, recently there was the spectacular Mills Are Alive show in Manningham. That is a small sample of what is to come when Bradford hopefully wins the title of UK city of culture 2025.

I will leave the finer details—Ministers can see things for themselves when they go to Bradford, as I hope they will—but I promise that Bradford will not hold back in its plans for 2025, and it will definitely not stray from our proud tradition of doing things differently. Bradford is beautiful; Bradford is brilliant. Bradford is a place

that people have to see, hear, taste, and experience for themselves. Bradford is the place that I owe everything to, and I could stand here and speak about it for hours—you will be delighted to know I am not going to, Mr Deputy Speaker. Ultimately, there can be no better place to award the title of city of culture 2025 than Bradford. It represents everything. I make my final plea to the Minister. This will make a difference. For all the reasons I have highlighted, Bradford is, and continues to be, the perfect candidate. Minister, this is our time. Give us that chance.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I cannot wait to visit.

5.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for securing this debate about Bradford's bid to become UK city of culture. He spoke eloquently and passionately about his city, of which he is so obviously proud, and I thank him for his contribution to the debate. He is a great champion of the city, and he will of course be delighted that Bradford was recently named one of the four places shortlisted for the title of UK city of culture 2025. It has been a competitive process, with all bidding teams submitting high-quality bids.

UK city of culture is the UK-wide quadrennial flagship competition organised by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, delivered in collaboration with the devolved Administrations. It invites places across the UK to set out their vision for culture-led regeneration. UK city of culture is about highlighting the role that culture plays in the heart of our communities; the hon. Gentleman mentioned that many times. It demonstrates that culture is for everyone, no matter who they are and where they come from. This is a key part of DCMS's broader efforts to level up opportunity. It uses culture as the catalyst for investment, in order to drive economic growth and regeneration, promote social cohesion, and instil pride in places, making them even more attractive to live in, work in, and visit.

Derry/Londonderry was the first title holder back in 2013, and Hull won in 2017. This prestigious title has huge benefits; previous hosts have attracted millions of pounds in additional investment, created jobs, and attracted thousands of visitors to the area. Coventry is the current UK city of culture; its term finishes in May. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the city has developed an extraordinary, year-long programme of events that put culture at the heart of social and economic recovery. As a result of Coventry being awarded the title of UK city of culture, more than £172 million has gone into funding music concerts, public art displays, the UK's first permanent immersive digital art gallery, a new children's play area in the centre of the city, the new Telegraph hotel, and improvements to public transport. A further £500 million has been ploughed into the city's regeneration since it was confirmed as the UK city of culture. More than £150 million of public and private sector investment was invested in the 2013 winner, Derry/Londonderry, and the 2017 winner, Hull, saw a 10% increase in visitor numbers during its tenure.

Bradford and the three other locations—County Durham, Southampton and Wrexham County Borough—were approved by the Secretary of State for Digital,

Culture, Media and Sport as the shortlist for the 2025 competition. That shortlist was based on advice given to the Government by the independent expert advisory panel, led by Sir Phil Redmond. The finalists were whittled down from a record 20 initial bids to eight outstanding long-list applications. The expert advisory panel will visit the four shortlisted places in May; then there will be a presentation from each of those places before the panel makes its final recommendation. The winner will be announced in Coventry in late May, so there is not too long to wait.

I am impressed by Bradford's ambition and the way it has embraced the UK city of culture competition. I am sure that Bradford, along with the three other shortlisted places, will continue to robustly showcase its places and the strength of its bid to the panel. The UK city of culture is a proven model for culture-led regeneration, but there is no blueprint for success, and each city of culture has a different character and tackles new and different issues. The expert advisory panel is looking for a fresh narrative for the next UK city of culture—a strong story, a sense of identity and a vision for change. As the hon. Gentleman and others outlined, Bradford is a vibrant city with a rich cultural heritage and a young and diverse population. It has a huge amount to offer local people and visitors, and it is one of the few places in the world to have not one, but two UNESCO designations. Saltaire industrial village is a UNESCO world heritage site, and as the world's first city of film, Bradford is also part of the UNESCO creative cities network. The area is also known for being the birthplace of the Brontë sisters and David Hockney, and for its strong cultural assets, such as the National Science and Media museum and the Alhambra theatre, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned—as well, of course, for its beautiful countryside.

Alongside all that, the area has recently seen significant investment in the arts and cultural sectors. Between 2018 and 2022, Arts Council England national portfolio organisations in Bradford have received more than £7 million, and organisations in Bradford's local authority have received £3.65 million through rounds 1 and 2 of the culture recovery fund. The libraries improvement fund has support for Bradford's libraries, so that they can improve their offer. Bradford is also one of 15 UK-wide locations that StoryTrails, one of UNBOXED's commissions, will visit this year. Bradford has been successful in securing some £20 million from the levelling-up fund to invest in the Squire Lane wellbeing and enterprise centre, and has received £4 million from the northern cultural regeneration fund to redevelop the Bradford Odeon, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

I understand that Bradford's bid is the outcome of lots of hard work delivered by the bidding team, and by the Cultural Place Partnership, which includes Bradford Council, the University of Bradford, Bradford College, representatives of the cultural sector and national funders, as well as the hon. Gentleman, the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) and many others. The team are focused on using the competition as a platform to showcase Bradford's strengths to the rest of the UK and the world, to improve opportunities for local people, and to increase access to jobs in the visitor economy and cultural sectors. There is an aim to add to the significant provision already in place and leave a

[Nigel Huddleston]

lasting legacy of increased visitor numbers, and to develop a more vibrant, sustainable cultural sector. There is also a focus on ensuring greater community engagement across the district, celebrating Bradford's diverse communities and increasing public participation in cultural activities.

This is not just about who wins the competition. There are clear benefits to all places that bid. For the first time, the eight long-listed places from across the UK received a £40,000 grant each to strengthen their long application ahead of the shortlisting stage. That has helped to level the playing field, and has encouraged places to develop deliverable plans, even if they do not win the title. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport wants all bidders to leverage the bidding process. We are committed to working with those who do not win, so that they can continue to forge

partnerships, develop culture-led change and strengthen cultural strategies; and we are working to signpost upcoming opportunities and funding. Hull, it should be remembered, was unsuccessful in bidding for the 2013 title, but it came back to win the 2017 title. Sunderland's bid for the 2021 title created the momentum to form a new arts trust, Sunderland Culture. Paisley, which also bid for the 2021 title, has since hosted a range of major events, including UNBOXED's About Us, earlier this month.

I applaud Bradford's dedication to winning the UK city of culture 2025 competition. I wish Bradford and, of course, the other three shortlisted places—County Durham, Southampton and Wrexham County Borough—the very best of luck for the remainder of the competition.

Question put and agreed to.

5.11 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 23 March 2022

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

Covid-19: Impact on Social Work

9.30 am

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of the covid-19 outbreak on social work.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. World Social Work Day was on 15 March, so it is perhaps timely to hold a debate in this House on the issue of social work. May I begin by wishing social workers everywhere, particularly in my constituency of Lancaster and Fleetwood, a belated but very happy World Social Work Day?

I see from my casework, as I imagine many other Members do from theirs, the amazing work that social workers do to support our constituents. Social work is one of the lesser-understood parts of our social care sector. Social workers come into people's lives at difficult and challenging times, and there can be a negative association with them. When social workers are in the headlines, that is often because the worst has happened. When the worst happens, that sadly often means that a child known to social services has died.

When Arthur Labinjo-Hughes was murdered by the very people who were supposed to love and care for him, that was national news. Everyone wanted to know what events had led to that tragic incident and how it could be prevented from ever happening again. Some people were asking why social services could not save him, and why they could not save Star Hobson, who was also killed by the people who were supposed to look after her.

Most of the time, social workers are not in the news. I know an awful lot about social workers. In fact, I was brought up by one. My dad is a retired social worker, but he spent many years working for Cumbria social services in probation, child protection and, latterly, in his longest stint, the youth offending team. Although there are probably many cases in which my dad supported individuals but perhaps did not manage to turn their lives around, I want to tell the anonymous story of a school friend of mine who was in contact with me a couple of years ago. She said, "Your dad was my social worker. I had fallen in with the wrong crowd, but your dad helped me turn my life around. Now I am a mum, I work, and I no longer have a criminal record. I managed to do that with the support of your dad." The story of my school friend would never make a story in a local paper, let alone a national, but that is the kind of work that social workers do in lots of different sectors. In particular, such cases involve supporting young offenders to turn their lives around.

Every single day, social workers carry out their roles. They support people with learning difficulties and autistic people. They work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. They carry out assessments and reviews, protecting people's liberties and best interests. Social workers are integral to upholding human rights and child protection, but we cannot ignore the sphere in which social workers work.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing the debate. Will she allow me to place on record my thanks to those on the frontline of social work in Glasgow? In particular, I pay tribute to the social work team in Easterhouse in the East community addiction team in Parkhead. Before covid-19, many of those social workers had an enormous workload, which has only been exacerbated by several lockdowns. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is important that we listen to the voice of social workers on further support from Government as we emerge from covid-19, as their workload has undoubtedly changed?

Cat Smith: I thank the hon. Member for making that point. As a frequent visitor to his constituency, I know that his social work team in Glasgow do an amazing job supporting his constituents, and he is right to say that the voice of social workers needs to be heard by Government.

I have spent a lot of time with social workers over the years, some of whom have gone on to be elected Members of the House and who were then able to provide a platform for social work issues, and I have huge respect for the Members of the House who come from a social work background. One of the first MPs I met, Hilton Dawson, was a social worker before being elected MP for Lancaster in 1997. After Parliament, he went to work at the British Association of Social Workers, where I worked with him before being elected to the House. There is probably quite a nice symmetry in that, but I suspect that he is probably watching and wondering why it has taken me so long to get a Westminster Hall debate on this important issue. Indeed, given that his most recent political activity was standing in the Hartlepool by-election for the North East party, he has certainly been on a political journey, too.

The British Association of Social Workers is the professional organisation for more than 22,000 social workers in the UK. Its annual survey was carried out at the end of 2021, and the results were published just a few weeks ago. Social workers are on the frontline. They know their own profession and what they need in order to be able to fulfil their statutory and non-statutory obligations to a high standard. The Government should be listening to them.

In the survey, the three biggest challenges facing the workforce were determined to be the demands of administrative tasks, workload demand and adequacy of staffing. Nearly 5,000 family social workers left the profession during 2021—up 16% compared with 2020. How can we trust that we are doing the best by social workers if they are leaving the profession in such numbers and trying to do their job without departments being fully staffed?

High workloads and staff shortages will lead to current staff burning out. In many professions, burnout at work means that someone drops the ball on a deadline and perhaps one or two deadlines are missed, but a burnt-out social worker can be a matter of life and death for a child. It is not the fault of that social worker; the issue is the environment in which they work. Social workers do their very best to support people, so Government must do their very best to support social workers.

The pandemic did not only affect child safeguarding. The challenges facing care homes were also a key focus, but Government failed to bring forward many solutions.

[Cat Smith]

They only issued guidance and let care homes make their own decisions about visitors and testing, and that caused a lot of upset. Social workers reported that they were unable to access care homes. Social workers have a key safeguarding role, and residents' family members and social workers facing access restrictions only heightened the worry about what was going on inside care homes.

How were people coping with the changes? Many care home residents, especially those with illnesses such as dementia, would not have understood why their family members were not visiting. That was never the right approach. I appreciate that the confusion in a pandemic can lead to some rash and ill-thought-out decisions, but it must never be allowed to happen again. Upholding human rights is not an optional add-on; it is a fundamental part of our social care system and should never have been restricted.

The pandemic also had an impact on people with learning disabilities and autistic people. "Do not resuscitate" orders were being issued based solely on a person's learning disability. That is a national scandal. Does the Minister understand the distress that those orders will have caused people? People with learning disabilities have, for a variety of reasons, much poorer health outcomes than the population as a whole. Along with other vulnerable and marginalised groups, people with a learning disability and autistic people bore a disproportionate weight of the impact of covid-19, including a greater risk of death.

This cannot be looked at simply in the context of the pandemic, either. We know from scandals such as that involving Winterbourne View care home that people with learning disabilities and autistic people are not always treated in the way they should be. The British Association of Social Workers' "Homes not Hospitals" group campaigns on this, so will the Minister agree to a meeting with that group to talk about what the Government can do to get people with learning disabilities and autistic people out of hospital and back into the communities where they belong?

Social workers join the profession because they care deeply about society and the people within it, but social workers can do their job properly only if the Government are giving them the resources to do so. There needs to be proper funding for local authorities so that councils can invest in preventive measures. The cuts to local authority budgets affect social work, but also sectors such as youth work. I have secured many debates in the House on youth work and I know that there is sometimes, in some places, a bit of a tension between the youth work profession and the social work profession but, particularly for children in care, a strong working relationship between youth workers and social workers can really make the difference for a young person's life outcomes.

We do not know whether there will be another dangerous strain of covid-19 or a new virus altogether that may force us into more restrictions on the way we live our lives, but we have to learn the lessons from this pandemic. Social work and social workers must be at the heart of recovery. It is a profession that is often hidden until someone needs the support of a social worker, but it is work that we could not be without.

9.40 am

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on securing the debate. Like her, I have had the opportunity over many years in the world of local government to see the transformative benefits that social workers can bring to the lives of many of our most vulnerable people. Those are children in the care system, adults with learning disabilities and people facing difficulties in old age, where the professionalism, attention to detail and the care provided by local authorities across the country have enabled people to live the best life they possibly can in the circumstances they face.

The topic of today's debate makes clear that the pandemic has tested not just the professionalism of our social workers, but our care system's capacity to respond. We will all have seen amazing examples of how social workers and those connected to them have stepped up to the plate. The local authorities that serve my constituency—the London Borough of Hillingdon and the London Borough of Harrow—both played key roles in the community. Social workers identified the needs of individuals and harnessed support from volunteers, charitable and community organisations, to ensure that, where there were limits to what the state could do to provide for people in a time of acute need, others were able to step in.

I will give the example of H4All, a charitable organisation in Hillingdon that brought together the efforts of several organisations, supported by a local authority that recognised that social workers would be able to do their best work if they were effectively supported. For example, with libraries closed, library staff were redeployed to man call centres for people who needed to raise a concern about someone they knew, a family member, or who were supporting someone and needed to arrange delivery of medication.

They were able to use staff who were redeployed, so that social workers could concentrate on things that only they could do, such as assessments of need to enable people to progress in their care packages, the preparation of people to be discharged from hospital, and acute work in children's services, such as child protection for those known to be at risk, who might otherwise have missed the opportunity of a regular visit from a professional to ensure they were safe and thriving in their placement. One of my neighbours, a foster carer, was supported through the process of fostering a baby who was placed with her. Social workers were able to continue ensuring that system for supporting the needs of the most vulnerable, despite all the pressures of covid.

In the context of the debate about the future of social work, covid has given us the opportunity, not just in social work but in many parts of our system, to learn lessons and identify what we can do better, based on how covid tested the operation of the system. As the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for social work, I am conscious that, along with other professional organisations, social workers are taking a key interest in how the profession will develop and sit in the context of the care system, of which it is a crucial part.

That is not a new debate. I commend the Department for Education for seeking, through the fast-track programme, to identify ways in which people who want

to become social workers could develop their professional standards. They are able to pursue a programme, facilitated by placements in different types of organisations, with different aspects of the social work profession. Having sat in on some of those training sessions, I was fascinated to see how social workers saw things in a different light, through talking to people who managed cases other than the ones they might commonly come across in their day jobs. They were able to support each other to develop their professional judgment. The proposed re-tendering of that programme, although an important part of the system, needs to ensure that it continues to support social workers in developing the highest professional standards, and does not lose the focus it has brought to the system.

Some of those issues are consistent across all parts of the social work profession. We heard, for example, about case loads, which remain a challenge for social workers whether they are dealing with adults with learning disabilities, very elderly people, or children who are in need for whatever reason. The context of regulation for children's social workers is different from that of adult social workers, and that also remains a challenge. The work of the Care Quality Commission is perhaps beginning to diverge from the work of Ofsted, so the regulatory framework for the social work profession is becoming more and more diverse, reflecting the fact that the clients that social workers serve are different.

It is worth reflecting on some of the pandemic lessons. We have seen, for example, a move away from significant numbers of family support workers in children's services, as well as occupational therapists in supporting elderly people, and in the role of youth workers, which was referred to earlier. Perhaps we need to reflect on the structures that we expect from our local authorities and that our regulatory framework drives. Perhaps there should be a greater degree of local flexibility to bring together those different but allied professions so that they focus on the needs of the most vulnerable.

Local authorities will do that for a variety of reasons. I recall Hackney Council's so-called pod model bringing together youth workers, therapists and social workers. By the time that other local authorities had adopted that model, Hackney had given up on it because it felt it was not working any more, so there is sometimes a risk that, when tested, new ideas prove to be not as effective as we would like. However, we should see the deployment particularly of folks such as family support workers in a way that can really help the social work profession to do what it does best and what only it can do, and the service that vulnerable people receive should be of the highest quality possible.

The greater divergence among the workforces around children, adults and the elderly can be positive, particularly in the context of extra funding, which we expect to see coming into the system through the decisions that the Chancellor and the Government make. Some will say that that is overdue and insufficient, but I can say that from my experience in a local authority it will be most welcome. It will ease a lot of the pressure that has been building up in the system and, because the local authority funding model is so diverse across the country, it can re-base social services departments so that they are more consistently funded through a national programme in a way that putting the burden on council tax payers cannot achieve because of the diversity of how much funding is raised.

The social work profession has an opportunity to consider parallels with what is going on in other professions, especially across the public sector where we see many similar roles. How is the nursing profession developing? How are the lessons from professional development being applied? In teaching and policing we see not just similar salary levels, but often common qualifications and of course a focus often at the most vulnerable end on the same families, so are there things that we can do to improve the way that the training and development across all those professions is aligned so that they can work more effectively together?

The pandemic period, the debate today and the celebration that has been referred to have demonstrated once again that social workers and those who support and work with them remain a key part, often a hidden part, of the social infrastructure of our country. The local authority with the most people coming into contact with any part of social care has less than one in five of its population receiving any form of support from social care during the whole of their lives. Most people will never be touched by social care, but for a critical group in society it is absolutely vital that they receive care to the highest possible standard, and I join the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood in paying tribute to the work that social workers have done in keeping society together during the pandemic.

9.49 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for raising such an important issue. I had hoped that we would have more people here today to participate because there is not one MP who does not have regular contact with their social workers on behalf of constituents; it happens in my office every week. I want to mention some of the issues and care packages in place, and I will mention some figures for my constituency.

I am pleased to see the Minister in her place. I always look forward to her response—not just because she is a good friend, but because she always answers with knowledge and help, which I think we all wish to see. That is exactly what the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood is seeking with the debate. I am also pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), in her place—I look forward to her contribution—and my good friend the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who speaks on behalf of the Scottish National party. We are pleased to participate in this debate on such an important issue.

It is not the fault of anyone in this room, but the outbreak of the pandemic has cruelly exacerbated the social work situation. How we respond is the subject of the debate and the Minister's responsibility. There is no doubt those in the profession have faced unprecedented challenges, and it is great to be here today to illustrate some of them and to discuss how we can support our brilliant social workers.

We have mentioned the NHS and many of those who kept the wheels turning and the shelves filled, who visited people and who made everything happen through a pandemic of unprecedented ferocity. All of society gelled together as a team to make that happen. I meet people every week in my constituency of Strangford

[Jim Shannon]

who make the lives of the vulnerable and those in need better. That is their responsibility, and I have that responsibility on their behalf.

We are sometimes confronted with incredibly difficult cases. I am no different from anybody else, so I suspect that my response is the same as everyone else's. Social workers are involved in some awful cases: the lives that people are confronted with, probably through no fault of their own, and the impact on children. I have a special place in my heart for children, because I am not only a father, but a grandfather; it is a great stage. Those of us in the Chamber who are grandparents will know that it is a wonderful experience. The great thing, Mr Robertson, is that we can give our grandchildren back at 7 o'clock at night! Whenever they get tantrummy and want to go to bed, or do not want to go to bed—it depends what mood they are in—we can always phone up their mum and dad to say, "By the way, the kids are ready to collect." We can enjoy all the fun, but for others on the frontline, I am afraid that there are real problems.

As of 2021, 105,000 people were employed as social workers for children, the elderly, and those who are vulnerable and in need. I am not asking the Minister to answer for Northern Ireland as that is not her responsibility, but I want to sew the Northern Ireland perspective into this debate because it echoes what the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood said in her introduction. The Minister always gives me some succour and encouragement in her response, and that is important.

There is predicted to be a mismatch between the supply and demand of social care professionals, with 1 million workers needed by 2025, which is not that far away. We seem to be having anniversaries regularly—whatever they may be for—and I look back and think, "That can't have been four or five years ago", but it was. Three years will pass quickly, and it is predicted that there will be a 35% shortfall in social workers. Will the Minister tell us from a UK perspective what has been done to recruit and train social workers, and to have the support at every level that is critical to a good response?

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend is outlining the extent of the problem and the imminent mismatch between supply and demand, which is just two and a half years away. Does he agree that what we need to see and hear from Government, both centrally and throughout the devolved regions of the UK, is an acknowledgement and admission of an impending problem? Action needs to be taken now, so that social workers and others in the care sector can see that our Governments are looking ahead, planning and preparing for the problems that we will all face.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend has summed up in a few seconds exactly what the debate is about, whereas I will take 10 or 12 paragraphs to explain it. His point is that we have to be strategic and visionary, and have a plan of action. Today is all about what that plan of action is.

David Linden: I visit schools in my constituency and speak to some of the kids about what they want to be when they grow up—although I am probably not grown up yet and do not know what I want to be—and it

strikes me that we have to look at this issue in the context of schooling, which I accept is devolved in Scotland. We need to encourage young people to think about careers in social work. Looking around the Chamber, I was probably the one in school most recently, but I do not recall being encouraged to look at social work, when we were told in the traditional way, "Here are careers you can do." Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we can do more to encourage young people to consider a career in social work, and would he be willing to promote that in Northern Ireland?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Many social workers I deal with are probably of a certain generation. He makes the point that we need to be preparing, and that goes back to my question to the Minister about having a strategy and plan in place.

I understand that many young people do come into social work, because I have met some, but—I say this very gently, and it is not in any way meant to be critical—they need to have experienced social workers to work alongside and gain their knowledge. Young people will sometimes be confronted with cases that they might not have the life experiences to deal with. That is not a criticism; experience is gained over many years. I have been confronted by such cases on behalf of constituents, and I feel that decisions are not always made—in my opinion, as someone who is not a social worker—as they could or should have been.

David Simmonds: I entirely agree with the hon. Member's point. Does he agree that programmes such as the fast-track ones bring the opportunity, in particular for young social workers who might be graduates straight out of university, to work with people who may have been in the profession for 20 or 30 years? Young social workers would have the chance to learn from experienced people and to see how they dealt with cases with which I, as a lead council member, was sadly familiar—for example, sometimes, the sexual abuse of children committed by professionals who were meant to be caring for them, or elderly people suffering complex financial abuse within a family. It is important that the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education continue to support that type of professional development, so that we can grow our own highly professional social workers in the future.

Jim Shannon: As my friend, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), said—and as I am trying to say, in my broken words—people have to start somewhere in life; they have to start their job somewhere and learn about their role.

Social care organisations have revealed that 75% of social workers feel more negative about their work life in 2021 compared with in the first year of the pandemic. People come to us all the time with problems, and I like that because it is my job. Many people say, "I don't know how you do your job, listening to people's complaints and always solving their problems, and so on", but I reply, "That's what life is about. Life is about making lives better." We need to be aware that social workers sometimes deal with complex and difficult issues. My question to the Minister is, has any assessment been done of the impact of the pandemic on social workers? If the figures are right—I understand that they are—that 75% of social workers feel more negative about their

work life in 2021, we have a potential problem. I hope we do not, but we must at least consider that and respond.

This situation is down to the increasing pressures and challenges that the social work sector has faced. Referrals of children to social services in Northern Ireland have increased every month since February 2020. The highest figure was in April 2021, with 3,616 children being referred. That clearly indicates that parents are struggling to cope, and is a clear sign of the increasing pressure on our social workers, which the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood illustrated very well in her contribution, and as other Members have reported.

We must not forget the impact that the covid outbreak has had on the social sector in relation not just to children, but to the elderly and the vulnerable. The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) rightly referred to an issue that is on my mind as well: people who depend on family members to look after their financial affairs. I have dealt with a few of those cases, which are always difficult because there are often two sets of family members saying two different things—but there is a person in the middle who is losing out.

The BBC revealed in mid-2021 that almost 2,000 people in Northern Ireland are waiting for care packages, so that they can be supported to live in their own homes. Just this week, a very lovely man who I have known all my life—he is well into his 80s now—has been ill and had to go to hospital. Although he wants to come home, and would be able to, he needs a care package in place before he can come home because, due to the nature of his disability, his wife would be unable to provide the physical care that he needs. That is not the Minister's responsibility; I am just illustrating the issue.

The wait for care packages could mean an increase of patients to residential care. My constituency of Strangford takes in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which has reported that 282 people were waiting from the end of August 2021. Social workers are a key part of making that a success story. The provision of home care is crucial in taking the additional pressure off of hospitals and care homes. We must ensure that our social workers have the capacity to deal with the increasing amount of care packages needed. I have never seen anything quite like it. I know that we are getting older—we are living longer and our bodies are breaking down, meaning that more people need care packages—but there has to be a strategy and a vision for how we deal with that, as has been pointed out in other contributions.

There is an increased risk of covid infection for those who work in the social work industry, as we have seen happen over and over. That is nobody's fault; it is the nature of life. It cannot be helped when tests are positive and people must take time off work. However, that is where we can step in to ensure that there is a sustainable number of social workers to cope with the level of care needed by children, the elderly, the vulnerable and the disabled.

We must also take into consideration the impact of the pandemic on our social workers' mental health. Some 55% of respondents to a survey said that they felt increased anxiety—in an already difficult job—given the risk that they posed to the vulnerable by potentially

carrying covid. I am keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on how we can better deal with that. One way would be to have extra staffing, as the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood mentioned earlier. Social workers are as prepared as they can be in terms of personal protective equipment, as the Government and the Minister have done extremely well in responding to that need, but the Government must step in when it comes to staffing and workload. Many social workers have stated that their casework load has increased by as much as 40% over the pandemic. They are working longer hours—I know that, because they tell me that and I see it—and those longer hours are probably for the same money. Overtime rates will never compensate for the loss of physical wellbeing and mental health.

The Department of Health and Social Care must have provisions in place to ensure that our social workers are not under the most extreme pressure. I very much look forward to the Minister's response and the encouragement that she will give us. I urge her and her Department to consider the impact of that pressure not only in England, where her responsibility lies, but across the United Kingdom. I know that the Minister, like those in other Departments, regularly contacts her equivalent Minister in the devolved Administrations, be that in Scotland, Wales or, in my case, Northern Ireland, so I know that there is continuity between those Administrations. I say very gently to my two friends, the hon. Member for Glasgow East and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk, that I very much think that within this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we are always better together; we can work together and exchange ideas, and we can all benefit from that. I say that gently to my friends in the SNP, because I know that they really do agree with me that we are better together.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I call Martyn Day.

David Linden: How do you top that, Martyn? [*Laughter.*]

10.5 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am managing not to laugh; I will do my best.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for securing today's debate, which has been thoughtful and consensual. It is a worthy topic and I start by expressing my own gratitude to social workers for their outstanding work during these difficult times. They have continued to work tirelessly to support children, families, individuals and communities across a range of specialisms and services throughout the covid-19 pandemic.

I am grateful for the comprehensive and measured manner in which the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood outlined and opened the debate. It is a timely reminder to us all that, sadly, lives can be at risk when things go wrong, so it is vital that things do not go wrong and that social workers play a major role in helping to sort out people's lives.

There are around 11,000 social workers registered with the Scottish Social Services Council. They are part of a social services workforce of over 209,000 people and are aligned to, but a different profession from, social care professions. Most work in local authority settings, across adults, children's and justice social work.

[Martyn Day]

Registered social workers are also employed by the independent sector and may be self-employed independent social workers. They were all classed as key workers and admirably carried out their roles within the additional pressures of the pandemic climate. However, 77.7% of social workers interviewed by the British Association of Social Workers strongly agreed that working under lockdown had increased concerns around being able to safeguard children and adults. Concerns for the safety of women and children experiencing domestic abuse heightened over the pandemic. In some cases, lockdown and social distancing exacerbated already high-risk situations. It is deeply concerning that referrals to domestic abuse services increased during that period.

The Scottish Government are working tirelessly to ensure that frontline services continue to support adults and children experiencing gender-based violence, with £12 million allocated to tackle violence against women and girls. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Scottish Government allocated an additional £5.75 million to various organisations, including Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Scotland, to support those providing frontline services to people experiencing the violence of domestic abuse, and to ensure that services could meet increased demand. Services, including national helplines, remained open during the pandemic, so that anyone who needed help could access them.

The Scottish Government have also committed to review the funding and commissioning of special services, with an additional twin focus on domestic and sexual abuse services. They recently launched the Delivering Equally Safe fund, inviting applications from public bodies and third sector organisations. The fund provides up to £13 million a year from October last year to combat violence against women and girls.

Following the Scottish Government's commitment in the 2020-21 programme for government, they published revised national guidance for child protection on 2 September. The guidance, which incorporates learning from child protection cases, supports improved cross-agency working and outcomes for children at risk. Local implementation of the guidance has been supported by a national group that is chaired by the deputy chief social work adviser. Chief officer groups oversee local public protection arrangements and the assessment and response to risk, vulnerability and protection across the 32 local partnerships.

The Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 provisions were also developed to improve capacity and flexibility of local child protection processes and prioritisation of children at greatest risk. A local authority and Police Scotland data return, collected since April 2020, continues to be key to understanding how the pandemic is impacting on Scotland's vulnerable children and young people.

While the Scottish Government have worked to protect social workers and those they serve, the UK Government's requirements for mandatory vaccination of those working in care homes has forced valuable workers from the sector. The British Association of Social Workers issued a statement at the time warning of the dangers of the UK Government's approach and expressing opposition. In my opinion, the UK Government should have followed the Scottish Government's "educate and inform" approach to vaccination of care and social workers.

Social work relies very strongly on a human rights regime, which the Scottish Government have championed through working to enshrine the UN convention on the rights of the child and the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities in Scots law. The UK Government's shameless attempt to prevent the enshrining of the UN convention on the rights of the child does nothing to protect the rights of children, and their plans to overhaul or overturn the Human Rights Act are a direct threat to social work, as has been highlighted in the British Association of Social Workers' briefing. The UK Government should commit to supporting human rights and end their attacks on the Human Rights Act.

There can be no doubt that poverty is a driver of the need for social work interventions. As I have repeatedly called on the UK Government to make the £20 increase to universal credit and working tax credit permanent, it was disappointing that that was not done. The September cut to the £20 uplift meant that millions of claimants suffered a £1,000-a-year cut, with only tapering to soften the blow. That cut is estimated to have pushed 60,000 people in Scotland into poverty, including 20,000 children.

Cat Smith: I am very much enjoying the hon. Gentleman's contribution. I am glad he has raised the issue of poverty; that is one of the things I did not include in my contribution, but not because it is not important. Does he agree that it is important to understand the link between poverty and families needing support through social work, and that eradicating poverty would go a long way in easing many of the issues that we wish to address through social work?

Martyn Day: I agree entirely with the hon. Member. I am bringing my remarks to an end, and she has helped amplify my point, for which I am very grateful. On poverty, the British Association of Social Workers has commented in its briefing that

"it cannot be ignored that poverty will have wider repercussions, such as on social work."

I will leave that thought as my final remark. I hope it helps focus the Minister's response.

10.11 am

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for bringing the debate before the House, and for the work she does with the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) on the all-party parliamentary group for social work. The debate has been less well attended than some, but it has been high in quality. As parents, none of us really knows what our offspring think of us or what they will say in future, but it was good to hear my hon. Friend talk about her father, Alan Smith—the work he has done in social work, and what she heard from her friend—and for her to bring that experience here today and have it drive her work. I am sure he must be very proud, and we are grateful that she is doing it. Perhaps Parliament sometimes seems aloof to workers in the social work sector, but we all have our own personal stories and we bring them to this place to inform the debate.

Since becoming an MP, I have realised that my inbox is a fairly good indicator of what is happening in my constituency. In Bristol South, the high impact of violence

against women in the home has driven my casework in the six years for which I have been a Member of Parliament, but children's mental health and family crisis have become an increasingly substantial part of my inbox. Often, those cases have children at their core—those are the most heartbreaking, and are very difficult for our staff to deal with. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, we are not the frontline of those cases; often by the time parents, family members or friends have come to us, things have gone very wrong, and what we see in our inboxes is the tip of that iceberg. Social workers are at the forefront of the response, and what we have heard today and from the representative bodies in their briefing is really alarming.

I will focus my comments on two key issues: the workforce and more complex work. Every debate I have been involved in since taking on my role as shadow Front Bench spokesperson for health and social care has been dominated by one issue, which is the lack of people available to do the jobs we so desperately need. I say gently to the Minister that next week the Health and Care Bill will be back in this place after some excellent debates in the Lords, particularly on workforce, following the work done by the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt). It would be good if the Government could come back with some support for a workforce plan that is credible, is funded, and will give hope to all the people who are keeping our society functioning at that level. We know there are some battles to be had with the Treasury, but everyone in this room is right behind the Secretary of State and his Ministers in that battle.

As we have heard, vacancy rates are up to 9.5%, which starts to mirror the workforce crisis across many areas in the health and care sector. Some 5,000 children and family social workers have left a social worker post in England, which is a massive increase over five years. The vacancy rate is at a five-year high with about 6,500 vacancies and that is part of the wider trend, with the pandemic exacerbating the issue. It is important to note that the situation was not caused by the pandemic, but has been exacerbated by it. The wider trend, from high-pressured jobs to the undermining of support services such as Sure Start, has left social workers to pick up the pieces.

As we have heard, burnout is a worrying problem. A survey by the Social Workers' Benevolent Trust found that throughout the pandemic 75% of social workers were emotionally and mentally exhausted. That is true across much of the workforce, but we are now asking these people to pick up the pieces and go forward. Some good news from the Government on that would be welcome.

We know that the pandemic has increased the complexity of cases that social workers are dealing with, because of what is happening in the rest of society. Again, the situation has been exacerbated by the pandemic. I pay tribute to social workers in my constituency of Bristol South and across Bristol for the work they have done throughout the pandemic. In a survey of the sector, 67% of respondents who worked in children's services agreed or strongly agreed that they had seen an increase in referrals or their case load since the return to schools and colleges in autumn 2020. Members of Parliament know from discussions with headteachers in our

constituencies that where children, young people and families are presenting in schools, the vacancy rates and the lack of ability to pick up those cases are causing massive problems throughout the sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood talked about care homes and the experience of disabled adults throughout the pandemic, which is shocking. The Care Quality Commission's report about death rates in care homes should alarm us all. I know the Minister is very open to meeting with representatives of the sector and I am sure she will look favourably on my hon. Friend's request for a meeting. It would be valuable to bring that issue directly to the Government and, I hope, get a more positive response.

The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner made an excellent point about foster care support, and I know he has a lot of experience in the sector. Where families become most vulnerable, we need that support for the people who are coming forward. People lead different lives from those they led even 10 or 20 years ago, and Bristol City Council has led a lot of good work in encouraging people to come forward for foster care. People should know there is support available for them from the social work sector and that will help those children who we want to see succeed and thrive.

I shall keep my comments short because we want to hear from the Minister. We want to know that the sector has the Government's support as they take us out of this pandemic, and that hopefully people can start to thrive. It would be helpful if the Minister could outline how the Government will work with local authorities to address the rising vacancy rates in the social work sector. The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner made some interesting comments about the different ways in which local authorities often lead innovation and how they are prepared to learn and recognise that sometimes innovation does not work out. That is part of the learning cycle, which we need to support and encourage. I would welcome the Minister's comments on that.

Has the Minister assessed the impact of the rising cost of living on social workers? This afternoon, we have the spring statement and it would be good if there were some positive news for people who are living on median wages and experiencing the cost of living crisis, as well as for the families they support, who are feeling the impact of inflation and fuel costs. That is particularly the case for people who are in their homes and people with disabilities, who are feeling the pinch from the increasing fuel and heating costs. They could do with some good news, too.

I gently take the Minister back to the decision to cut universal credit, which pushed more families into poverty. We have started to have a discussion on that serious issue, which affects all countries of the United Kingdom, causing unnecessary hardship for families who are already dealing with complex social issues and escalating the cost of living crisis. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood said, we could lessen the load if people were not being plunged into greater poverty.

It would be good to hear from the Minister about rewarding the social workers on the frontline, who, as we have heard, are a key part of the infrastructure. Thankfully, most people do not encounter them, but for

[Karin Smyth]

those who do, they are absolutely key to the sort of country that we want to be, and we thank them for their work.

10.20 am

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for securing the debate so close to World Social Work Day, and for using her excellent speech to highlight the excellent and varied work that social workers do day in, day out. I had the pleasure of attending the world social worker of the year award ceremony, which was held here in Parliament on World Social Work Day. I know that many Members from both sides of the House enjoyed going along, meeting their local nominees and celebrating the fantastic work of social workers, as well as congratulating the winners of the awards.

Social work is a highly valued vocational profession and we thank all social workers for their important work to support those who are hardest hit, especially during the pandemic when we really relied on their support. Social workers provide a critical model of practice for the health and social care sector. They undertake relationship-based engagement with individuals, their families and communities, and combine emotional support with practical help at a time of great need. Their strengths-based personalised approach in understanding what matters enables them to shape people's care and support so that they can have the best possible lives. I pay tribute to them all, including the hon. Lady's father, who obviously contributed to changing many lives during his career.

Importantly, social workers work across agencies and connect people to the resources and the services that they need. They span the boundaries of our health and care workforce, ensuring that people's human rights are protected and that the individual's choice and control of their care and support is respected at all times. The pandemic has taught us that co-operation and collaboration across the health and care sectors are absolutely critical, and social workers are central to embedding that way of working. They co-ordinate health and care planning and make vital links to ensure that people with care and support needs do not slip through the gaps in provision.

We have never needed the expertise and insights of social workers more than we do now. As we emerge from the pandemic—into fresh anxieties and tragedies born from the war in Ukraine, the cost of living crisis and other things that we will have to deal with—we will turn to the social work profession for advice, guidance, leadership and support. Covid-19 had a significant impact on health and social care services, including social work, and the response of our workforce was one of dedication and commitment to the people whom they support. Those were unprecedented and challenging circumstances and we stand by the entire workforce and thank them for their vital work to make a difference to people's lives.

Our focus has always been on ensuring that the adult social care sector has the resources that it needs to respond to covid-19. Throughout the pandemic, we have made available more than £2.9 billion in specific

covid support funding for adult social care, including £1.81 billion for infection prevention and control, £523 million for testing, and £583 million for workforce capacity—recruitment and retention—as we know that there are shortages across the sector.

The infection control and testing fund and the workforce recruitment and retention fund supported the care sector to prevent the transmission of covid and to support local authorities in working with providers to boost staffing and support existing care workers until 31 March of this year. Some of that funding helped to enable local authorities to provide continuous support to those in need of social care, including by delivering social work appointments virtually, as well as in person where it was appropriate and safe to do so.

Social workers went above and beyond during the pandemic and they deserve huge thanks for their tireless work. That is why continuing to help social workers manage their mental health and wellbeing remains a priority for the Government. We are determined that everyone working in social care should feel they have someone to talk to or somewhere to turn when they find things difficult. As many hon. Members have said, they deal with the most complex and difficult cases. We are committed to supporting social workers to recover from their extraordinary role in helping our country through the pandemic. We will deliver a listening service to help relieve immediate pressures, as well as talking therapies and coaching sessions for those with more intensive needs.

The chief social worker for adults, Lyn Romeo, has implemented a range of measures during the pandemic, including partnering with Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust to issue guidance to support the wellbeing of adult social workers and social care professionals. She meets regularly with the principal social workers in each local authority and NHS trust, advising and supporting them on practice and workforce support for their staff during the pandemic.

We have invested in increasing the number of social workers completing their approved mental health professional qualification for local authorities to increase their capacity in responding to the needs of people with mental ill health. An additional 228 social workers will be supported to complete their training. Social workers have been supported to improve their knowledge and skills in working with people with learning disabilities and autism.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) mentioned the vital work that social workers do to support people with learning disabilities. The chief social worker for adults commissioned the British Association of Social Workers to develop a capability statement for social workers working with adults with a learning disability in 2019. That supports best practice in this important area, especially considering the impact of the pandemic on those with learning disabilities and/or autism.

As well as our focus on wellbeing, we know the importance of building and strengthening our social care workforce. A number of hon. Members mentioned that it is vital to strengthen the social care workforce so that we can meet demand now and in the future. It is encouraging to note that the number of child and family social workers in the workforce is increasing

every year, up from 28,500 in 2017 to 32,500 in 2021. That is 2% more than in 2020 and 14% more than in 2017.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly focused on recruitment and strengthening the workforce. The Government invest over £130 million a year on recruiting, training and developing social workers to ensure the social care workforce has the values, capacity, skills and knowledge to perform its roles. This includes investments in bursaries for undergraduate and postgraduate social work degrees. A new and very popular addition, which I am very proud of, because I worked on it in my last role, is degree apprenticeships.

We have education support grants to support practice placements in organisations delivering social work services. That is vital to build that experience that was mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford and the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden). We also have a range of postgraduate fast-track training programmes for those wanting to work in children and family social work or mental health social work. Our attention is not just on training our social workers of the future; we also invest a significant amount in leadership and development programmes for qualified social workers. That includes leadership programmes for social workers and the assessed and supported year in employment for newly qualified social workers. That provides high-quality support for every newly qualified social worker by sharing best practice and quality-assuring provision.

We have announced record investment in developing the social care workforce. In our recent White Paper, “People at the Heart of Care”, we set out our workforce development strategy and plans for the investment of £500 million over the next three years. I am sure we will be discussing that many times as we develop those plans. The investment will help us to realise our vision for a workforce of people experiencing rewarding careers with opportunities to develop and progress in the future. That includes a focus on how we can develop new training routes for people who want to become social workers.

We will also work with the adult social care sector, including providers and the workforce, to co-develop a universal knowledge and skills framework and careers structure. As well as supporting the development of our care workforce, we will help those wanting to progress into regulated professions such as social work. I am also delighted that the number of people taking part in the new social worker degree apprenticeship programme continues to increase, with 660 starts in 2019-20 alone. That is only the second year for which it has been available, so that is phenomenal growth.

Looking forward, we have commissioned Health Education England to work with partners to develop a robust long-term strategic framework for workforce planning. For the first time ever, the framework will include regulated professions working in social care, such as nurses, social workers and occupational therapists. That work will look at the key drivers of workforce supply and demand as well as careers, as has been mentioned, and will inform the direction of the health and care system over the next 15 years.

The framework will help identify the main strategic choices facing us, develop a shared and explicit set of planning assumptions and identify the actions required at all levels of using all our system levers. That will

ensure that we can plan for a workforce that is skilled, confident and equipped with the right support to deliver the highest quality health and social care in the future. It will also form the basis of our next phase of work to develop a long-term workforce strategy, led by NHS England and NHS Improvement in partnership with Health Education England and the Department of Health and Social Care.

David Simmonds: I very much welcome what the Minister is sharing with us today. Does she agree that it would be worth considering how to develop the finance function of health and social care? The recent Competition and Markets Authority report highlighted that a lot of the provision the private sector has brought into the care market, in both children’s homes and adult social care, is, frankly, quite an astonishing rip-off for the taxpayer. Profit margins of 30% and more are not unusual and these are complex structures that are extracting resources that could be spent on care. Does she agree that there is an opportunity both strategically and in developing the skills of social workers and others involved in those decisions locally to bring more focus to the issue so that we can ensure we procure the best possible care with an eye to value for money for the taxpayer?

Gillian Keegan: My hon. Friend raises an important point that we will address as part of the White Paper, “People at the Heart of Care”. It is important that we equip local authorities with the skills and tools they need to commission well in the market and to get the balance right between paying a fair cost for care while making sure that they get value for money for taxpayers.

Cat Smith: I welcome quite a lot of what the Minister is saying, and I hope that I am not straying beyond her brief. The complex issue with social work, of course, is that it crosses many Government Departments. While she is talking about the recruitment and retention of social workers, I would like to invite her to put on record her thoughts about why, particularly in child protection, a social worker tends to burn out a lot faster. People tend to go into child protection and then progress to different parts of social work. Would she share her thoughts on why child protection in particular seems to lead to such quick burnout for social workers?

Gillian Keegan: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. Anyone who has met social workers doing that vital job, particularly in child protection, has nothing but admiration for the job they do. It is an incredibly difficult job with incredibly difficult choices that are highly complex and have a massive impact on families and individuals. It is a highly stressful job, but we need to do more to support people in the workplace so that they can deal with their mental health, talk to people and share their experiences. There is no doubt that it is an incredibly difficult job and one that is done very well, but every day they face enormous challenges and big decisions.

Finally, last November we announced a review of leadership in health and social care, led by Sir Gordon Messenger. The review will report in early 2022 and is considering how to foster and replicate the best examples of leadership. Strong leadership in health and social care will help to ensure the best outcomes for our key priorities, including, most importantly, improved care

[Gillian Keegan]

for patients and service users. The review aims to ensure that the necessary leadership behaviours, strategies and qualities are developed to maximise these efforts. We all know that leadership is vital in these key professions.

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood mentioned the work of the British Association of Social Workers and the “Homes not Hospitals” campaign to help more people to get the support that they need in their community, so that they can leave hospital. I completely agree with the desire to get more people out of hospital and getting the right care in the community. Indeed, we have an action plan, “Building the right support”, which we will be publishing in the not-too-distant future. I will be delighted to meet with representatives of the British Association of Social Workers to discuss this further.

Once again, I thank all hon. Members who have provided valuable contributions and insights today. It is important for the sector that we have this debate. We know, in our role as Members of Parliament, the work that we can do to highlight the fabulous work that people are doing. That does not always get highlighted, so this is a fantastic opportunity to highlight the complexity of the social work role and the variety of the role—the many different areas in which social workers provide vital support and the link to ensure that people get the right services from a load of different public services and get the wraparound care necessary for them.

The measures that I have set out today show that the Government are fully committed to supporting and developing the social work workforce—it is vital, and recognised as vital—as well as the wider health and social care sector. I thank everybody for their contributions and I look forward to continuing to work to celebrate this fantastic profession.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I call Cat Smith to wind up the debate.

10.36 am

Cat Smith: Thank you, Mr Robertson. I had actually forgotten that I would get to wind up, but I will take the opportunity to thank all hon. Members for taking part in this important debate. I know that it will be reported on in various publications and read by social workers across the four nations of the United Kingdom, and I think that the contributions by the Members present will be appreciated. It is fair to say that social workers often feel invisible or unrecognised and that the only time they get the spotlight is when, sadly, things have gone horribly and tragically wrong. However, this has been an opportunity, so close to World Social Work Day, to highlight the good work that social workers do.

I thank the Minister for agreeing to meet with the “Homes not Hospitals” team at BASW. If she would not mind, I would be delighted if I could join her at that meeting.

Gillian Keegan indicated assent.

Cat Smith: There has been such a lot of agreement and consensus in this debate, and it has been an absolute pleasure to hear so many positive things said about social workers right across the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of the covid-19 outbreak on social work.

10.37 am

Sitting suspended.

Treharris: Restoration of Post Office Services

11 am

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I will call Gerald Jones to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. In accordance with the convention for 30-minutes debates, I am afraid there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up at the end.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the restoration of Post Office services in Treharris.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and I am pleased to have secured this important debate on behalf of residents in Treharris. Figures from Citizens Advice show that almost half of all adults visit a post office at least once a month. Sadly, that has not been the case for my constituents in Treharris, as three years ago this month the post office closed. The community of over 8,000 people has had no access to the post office services that were established in the village for decades.

I have previously raised this issue with the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who assured me that taxpayers' money had been made available to Post Office Ltd. Despite that, Post Office Ltd has made no effort to restore a post office branch in Treharris, even though I understand that several parties have expressed interest in operating a service. Shamefully, the Post Office has left Treharris and many other communities across the UK in limbo, as it allows what was supposed to be a temporary branch closure to drag on indefinitely. Quite frankly, that is inexcusable.

I have been working closely with local councillors Gareth Richards, Ernie Galsworthy and Ian Thomas, and my Senedd colleague Dawn Bowden MS, all of whom have received representations from residents and businesses about the closure. Indeed, a petition launched less than six weeks ago has already secured almost 700 signatures from people who want a post office restored in Treharris, and it is not hard to understand why.

Until just a few years ago, Treharris was home to three major banks, all of which have now closed. The post office was a lifeline for residents and businesses. Treharris is still home to many businesses that have had to make alternative arrangements now, often at great inconvenience and cost. Glib suggestions by Post Office Ltd about using branches in Trelewis or Nelson fail to take account of issues such as low car ownership—around 30% of my constituents do not own a car—or the hour-long walk up steep hills to access the nearest post office. Public transport is sporadic, with a service once an hour at best. Long difficult walks and uncertain bus journeys—it appears Post Office Ltd has little understanding of the geography and topography of our area.

One local resident told me recently that they rely heavily on the post office service and budget their weekly bills using the cash they withdraw when they receive their pension. Over the past three years, they have had to make a weekly trip to Trelewis or Nelson to

withdraw their pension, which involves taking half a day for a return bus journey and the added cost that entails. That is an unnecessary cost and an inconvenience that has a detrimental impact on many of my constituents.

In the three years since Treharris post office closed, there has been no attempt to provide mobile provision, and despite my office asking about that, no response has yet been given. Post Office Ltd's own statement of principle says that it

"will provide an update to locally elected representatives if the status of the temporarily closed branch has not changed after 12 months."

That did not happen.

Treharris is not alone in this situation; there is something very wrong with Britain's post office network. Citizens Advice, the statutory consumer advocate for postal consumers, says in "Post: The state of the sector in 2022" that

"by September 2021, 1,291 post offices across Great Britain were temporarily closed, nearly twice as many as 5 years ago. And many 'temporary' closures last a significant period of time - more than 8 in 10 are shut for over a year. In reality many of these post offices are permanently closed."

The report goes on to say that one rural post office in three in Great Britain is now provided as a part-time outreach service. Those post offices are open for an average of five and a half hours a week, although many are open for an hour—just one hour—a week.

I have some specific questions for the Minister. How can the Government allow so many post offices to be, essentially, permanently closed without the courtesy of consultation, discussion or debate with the communities they serve? How can it be that the Government provide money to Post Office Ltd to reopen branches, yet so many communities are left without a service?

As we have seen from the scandalous way in which Post Office Ltd treated its own sub-postmasters, its *modus operandi* is to keep quiet and hope that the problem goes away. I can assure you, Mr Robertson, and, more importantly, Post Office Ltd that the community of Treharris will not just sit silent. Treharris is a vibrant and viable community that is rapidly expanding owing to its proximity to Cardiff. There is, I believe, more than sufficient demand to sustain post office branches in Treharris, Trelewis and Nelson. The fact that Treharris does not have an operational post office when there is such strong local support is shocking.

On behalf of my constituents, I ask that the Government do all in their power to ensure that the service is restored to Treharris post office as quickly as possible. I hope that the Minister will provide much needed answers to give the residents of Treharris the assurances that they seek and very much deserve.

11.6 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) on securing today's important debate. I thank him for his commitment to the post office network, in particular his commitment to his constituents in Treharris and to getting postal services for them, especially given the social value that post offices provide to so many people.

[Paul Scully]

Post offices play a crucial role in communities and for small businesses around the United Kingdom, and they comprise the largest retail network in the country, with more than 11,500 branches. Over the past 10 years, the Government have provided more than £2.5 billion to support the post office network. Crucially, that has included an annual subsidy to ensure the viability of rural and community branches. Since 2019, that has been maintained at £50 million a year, and I can confirm that it will remain at the same level until 2025. That shows that we in the Government are committing significant funding to the future of the network.

The country has faced unprecedented challenges in responding to the covid-19 pandemic, and post offices were essential services and postal workers key workers. That enabled the continuation of essential services provided by post offices, which would not have been possible if it was not for the hard work of postmasters and postal staff, who worked tirelessly to ensure that those services could continue. That enabled people to keep in touch with loved ones, which provided a lifeline to our communities and to the most vulnerable. That goes to the heart of what the hon. Gentleman was talking about: why people in Treharris value services that are as close to them as possible.

I would like to take a moment to thank postmasters and post office staff for their tireless efforts, the immense contribution made to communities across the UK, and their continual hard work and support. I am extremely thankful to all postmasters, who are pillars of their communities.

In a network as large as this, there will be variations in the number of branches open at one time. That is usually outside the Post Office's control and is subject to external changes, such as postmasters retiring or branches closing and new ones opening. The network fluctuates and changes over time. That churn in the network is part of the modern and dynamic business that is the Post Office, but the Government-set access criteria ensure that services remain within reach for all citizens, which helps to protect the network: 99% of the UK population are within 3 miles of a post office outlet, and 90% within 1 mile.

To allow itself time to identify alternative ways to provide services, the Post Office requires operators to provide six months' notice of a branch closure. Those plans apply to all partners, whether a multiple retailer or an individual postmaster. Where notice is given, the Post Office works with communities to ensure that the service is maintained.

As we have heard, Treharris post office has been closed for nearly three years, and I recognise that that is extremely frustrating for the hon. Member, and indeed for his constituents. He has been campaigning extremely hard to reopen Treharris post office, whether it be on the existing site or a business taking over that site. I thank him for his commitment to ensuring that the impact on his constituents is fully understood by the Government, the Post Office and the House. It reminds us how important post offices are to our communities, not only acting as a hub with social value but connecting the country, from Swansea to Stockport, indeed to Strangford and Stirling, as we have seen from our absent hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim

Shannon), who would normally be here contributing to the debate. Post offices are valued across all four nations of this great country.

Changes to the network are extremely concerning to members of the community who daily rely on postal and other services. I understand that the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney recently met with the Post Office to discuss the future of Treharris post office. As he is aware, the Treharris post office will remain closed. He mentioned the Trelewis branch, just under a mile away. That was subject to a commercial transfer, which resulted in an extension of opening hours from 7 am to 9 pm, seven days a week. Two branches in such close proximity could reduce the viability of both businesses, based on current levels of post office footfall in the area.

Like many businesses, Post Office is operating in a challenging economic climate, and having two businesses open may not be sustainable. Post Office Ltd carried out a comprehensive review of the network, to ensure it is meeting the evolving needs of customers. It assessed the current services in Treharris and concluded that customer demands have been met, but I appreciate what the hon. Member said about the pressures on the local community due to the bus service. I hope the Post Office will listen to that, as well as the debates in this place, and reflect that in any further considerations of the area's coverage.

Gerald Jones: I thank the Minister for giving way and for his speech. I support his comments about post office workers, who have been essential to the national effort during the pandemic. I want to re-emphasise the topography for communities such as Treharris. A mile away does not sound a lot but, with steep hills and a poor bus service that is sporadic at best, those challenges are too great to overcome for communities and residents alike in the valleys.

Paul Scully: I have no doubt. This is where it is right to bring to bear the hon. Member's local championing and expertise. It is easy for us to look at a bit of paper or at Google Maps, but that does not emphasise the topography he describes. I very much take that on board. I hope that the Post Office will equally take that on board, as it listens and reads *Hansard*, and will reflect on that when considering wider views on the Post Office network in the hon. Member's area. Because the Post Office operates as an independent commercial business, the company has the commercial freedom to deliver the branch network within the parameters we have set, but I want to reassure the hon. Member that his concern has been taken seriously. I will continue to monitor network numbers in his area.

The hon. Member referred to recent Citizens Advice research that highlighted the number of branches classed as temporarily closed. I agree that the overall number of branches classed as temporarily closed needs to be reviewed. Post Office has started that review and is engaging with Citizens Advice on the process to reclassify the majority of branches classed as temporarily closed to permanently closed. I will engage with Post Office to find out its plans regarding this specific branch, as part of that exercise.

The hon. Member talked about outreach, as he has done on other occasions, not being a substitute for a bricks-and-mortar shop. Clearly, we would all prefer

bricks-and-mortar shops in our communities. That is the ideal for any post office services. In absence of that branch, it does provide a full range of services and remains an important means of maintaining access. Post Office does try to keep set times for outreach services for each week, so local communities can rely on them timewise. They know the patterns, so they are not hoping and waiting for a service to come, but I freely admit that we would all rather have that bricks-and-mortar post office, both for the convenience and for the social value I have talked about.

The retail sector has undergone a significant period of change, which has been accelerated by covid-19 and has raised many challenges that we are working hard to address. The Post Office continues to explore new business opportunities to ensure a thriving national network for the benefit of communities, businesses and postmasters up and down the country. Post offices play a key role in supporting high streets across the UK and helping keep town centres vibrant, as well as levelling up communities throughout the country. On 15 July, we published the “Build Back Better High Streets” strategy, which set out the Government’s long-term plan to support the evolution of high streets into thriving places to work, visit and live.

As demonstrated during the pandemic, the Government have sought to protect people’s jobs and livelihoods while supporting businesses and public services across the UK. Post offices, like many other businesses on the high street, are eligible for Government support. We will continue to provide 66% business rate relief until the end of the month and a temporary 50% relief in 2022 and 2023 to eligible businesses; reduce the burden of business rates for all businesses by freezing the multiplier for 2022-23; introduce a new relief to support investments in property improvements; and introduce measures to support green investments and the decarbonisation of non-domestic buildings.

However, the trend towards online shopping has been accelerated by covid-19, resulting in more and more of us shopping online. Post offices, whether in Treharris and Trelewis or further afield, will clearly need to keep up to meet those consumer demands. A new agreement has recently been signed with Amazon and DPD, and

more than 3,100 branches now offer click and collect services, allowing consumers to receive their goods quickly and conveniently.

To conclude, I thank the hon. Member for his contribution; for bringing this debate before the House; and for making sure that the voice of Treharris has been heard, not only by this House, by me as the Minister or by Government, but by the Post Office, which—as I said—will be monitoring this debate.

Gerald Jones: Just to reiterate, the community has not had a consultation on the temporary closure. I seek reassurance from the Minister that any changes from a temporary closure to anything more permanent would be subject to a full community consultation, because the community deserves nothing less than to have its voice heard in a consultation process.

Paul Scully: I will certainly reflect that in the conversations I have with post offices, not just in Treharris, but all around the country. It is important that the Post Office operates as an independent commercial business, but none the less it has a responsibility to provide social value as well as economic value to reflect the communities it serves. In doing so, it needs to listen to those voices and consider all aspects of this issue, because the most vulnerable in our communities—the hon. Gentleman talked about the topography of getting from Treharris to Trelewis—are often those who need access to cash and services because they do not necessarily have good online access, or any online access at all. We need to work through a reasonable listening exercise to make sure any decisions are taken in full knowledge of the facts and the views of the people the Post Office network serves.

We in this place all share a common cause: ensuring that a vital national asset continues to serve our constituencies for many years to come. I reiterate that I too am absolutely committed to safeguarding the post office network, and will continue to work closely with the Post Office to deliver that sustainable network and deal with the challenges faced in a post-covid world.

Question put and agreed to.

11.19 am

Sitting suspended.

A5 in the Midlands: Improvements

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of increasing capacity and other improvements to the A5 in the midlands.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, on an important day here in Westminster, and to be able to highlight a vital issue for residents and businesses in my constituency and in the broader west midlands region. By way of introduction, the A5 is one of the UK's oldest roads and a strategic route operated by National Highways. It connects London to north Wales and runs through large parts of central England, and I wish to focus on that part of the road.

For many years, various groups have been involved in campaigning about the state of the road, including colleagues from neighbouring constituencies, many of whom are present today; leaders of our local councils; businesses, both large and small, throughout the west midlands; and Midlands Connect, which researches, develops and progresses transport projects to provide the best social, economic and environmental benefits to the midlands. We also have an overarching group called the A5 Transport Partnership.

In recent years, all those groups have been lobbying central Government for funding to improve the strategic 53-mile corridor of the A5 running from the M1 at junction 18 in Warwickshire—close to and then bordering my constituency—all the way through to the M6 at junction 12 in Staffordshire. That strategic corridor through the west midlands not only connects the M1 and the M6, but intersects the M42 and the M69.

Those motorways in the centre of England are four of the country's busiest motorways, and the A5 corridor is home to almost 3 million people, supporting 1.3 million jobs and serving several large cities and towns, such as Tamworth, Nuneaton, Cannock and Hinckley, as well as my constituency of Rugby. It also supports major employment sites including Magna Park and the MIRA enterprise zone.

Given its strategic importance at the centre of England, this section of the A5 sits at the heart of what is known as the logistics golden triangle, around the districts of Rugby, Daventry, Harborough, Hinckley and Bosworth. With that golden triangle, the corridor creates £22 billion in gross value added annually, which is approximately 10% of the total GVA of the area covered by Midlands Connect, the organisation entrusted by central Government to help identify research on the most important transport investments.

I intend to show that, with the improvements we all believe to be necessary, this corridor of the A5 has the potential to provide an alternative route to our existing congested motorways, while simultaneously supporting housing and employment growth.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the importance of the A5 to residents and businesses in Staffordshire and across the midlands. Having campaigned with my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson), and with the Government against the building of the West Midlands Interchange, which is at

the A5 roundabout near Gailey in Staffordshire, does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that we protect our environment and our green belt, as well as tackle congestion on the A5 and other Staffordshire roads?

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend is right. The environmental benefits are important, but I want to focus on the one that we would achieve by having less congestion, with car engines running for less time, and on the efficiencies and economies that can be provided to our local area as a consequence of a more efficient and effective A5.

Let me turn to the growth that is forecast for the area around the A5. Local councils within the corridor anticipate that, over the next 15 to 20 years, their local plans will bring forward 103,000 new homes, 16,000 new jobs and a further 524 hectares of employment land, which need a road. By investing in the A5 and improving its performance and resilience, we believe that the central Government have the opportunity to unlock the growth aspirations and priorities of the region.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbouring MP on securing this important debate on the A5. He makes some salient points about the level of economic growth along the A5 by comparison with other parts of the country. Does he agree, however, that without sufficient investment, such as the long-awaited dualling of the A5, we risk missing out on a huge amount of economic growth?

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend anticipates my point. He is exactly right: we need to have an efficient road that enables growth to take place. One of the challenges of the A5 is that it is dualled in parts, but single carriageway in others. There currently appears to be no consistent approach to an upgrade, and we need that upgrade in order to achieve our local councils' ambitious objectives for the area.

As part of the wider strategic road network, the A5 currently carries 23,000 vehicles a day on its busiest section, so it is a pretty hefty road. Sadly, however, and despite its increasing importance and usage, the A5 in the midlands has not seen a proportionate increase in funding to provide resilience and capacity. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) points out, if that is provided, it will enable the A5 to spearhead and safeguard sustained growth in the region.

The fear is that, if neglected, the A5 will act as a barrier to growth rather than an instrument of it. With investment, we believe the A5 can become a significant corridor for growth by enabling greater east-west connectivity, providing access to the M6 toll road, and supporting north-south movements through its strategic interchanges with other regionally important motorways, as I have already mentioned.

In its November 2018 A5 strategy document, the A5 Transport Partnership outlined three key strategic interventions that it argued would be required to unlock the potential of the area served by the A5, and they are relevant today. The first priority is to make improvements between the M42 and M69—a combination of online and offline dualling to deliver the first phase of the A5 expressway, providing expansion of the MIRA site, which sits between Nuneaton and Hinckley, and works associated with the construction of HS2 at junction 10 of the M42. That is the first priority.

The second priority is the part between the M69 to M1 and M42 to M6. Again, it would be a combination of online and offline dualling, but this time to deliver the second and third phases of the A5 expressway. A third objective is to make better use of the M6 toll road. Those of us who have used the M6 toll road will know that it is not to capacity. If we can improve the size, we can get more traffic off the M6 and on to the toll road. In addition to those key priorities, improvements are needed to enhance the A5's connectivity to the wider strategic road network. I know there are proposals for a new junction 20A on the M1, to bring relief to junction 20 at Leicester, which is the junction between the M1 and M69. That will provide additional growth opportunities.

Ministers are aware of the need for investment, given that one of the third road investment strategy pipeline projects is the upgrade between junction 1 on the M69 and junction 10 on the M42, and I hope that the debate will further press the case to bring that scheme forward. By securing this much-needed upgrade of the A5, we can help deliver growth around the corridor route, support network resilience, ensure greater sustainability and safety, and manage the impact of freight on the road.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire made some remarks about the economics, which I want to focus on. The 53-mile section between the M1 and the M6 plays a significant role in supporting the sub-regional economies of Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Coventry, Staffordshire and west Northamptonshire, and the economic performance of the A5 is strong when looked at in the light of the broader west midlands economy. As I mentioned, a number of important economic centres along that corridor will be subject to further expansion in coming years.

The MIRA enterprise zone is expanding; Magna Park in Leicestershire, in my hon. Friend's constituency, is expanding; DIRFT 3 in Northamptonshire, which sits on the border of my constituency, is currently the subject of substantial construction; and Kingswood Lakeside Employment Park in Staffordshire—which I believe is close to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke)'s constituency—is coming forward. In my constituency, we have a substantial residential development at Houlton and the Rugby Gateway mixed-use development. I hope I am building a case for why it is imperative that the A5 is upgraded, to ensure that its present constraints do not curtail this planned growth or act as a barrier to continuing inward investment.

It is worth pointing out that unemployment levels along this corridor of the A5 are currently lower than the UK average, and with the expansion of the economic hubs I have just referred to and the further employment opportunities that will bring, that situation will only improve. As well as supporting local economies, the road has a wider role in providing connectivity to other economic centres, such as the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge growth corridor. When we combine the housing growth with the economic growth and the increased employment opportunities, it is clear that the A5 will come under significant further pressure over the coming years.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic case for why the A5 is so important. Does he agree that one of the principal problems with

the A5 is the boundaries of the districts, councils and administrations that it borders? That makes things hard, because people always see the A5 as a periphery. We have heard talk about the west midlands, the east midlands, Leicestershire and Northamptonshire, and that is part of the problem. It is so important that my hon. Friend has secured this debate to make sure the Government realise we can release this stricture across the centre of the UK between Wales, England and London, and that doing so would make a huge difference economically, but also to the daily lives of the people we represent.

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend is right. The road sits as the boundary—it is the boundary of my constituency, the boundary of Warwickshire, and a regional boundary—but the local authorities have come together pretty effectively to press this case. It would have been very easy for each authority to have tried to do its own thing, but as it is, a range of bodies, including those in the private sector, have come together to argue the case for improvement. The Government have been clear that they recognise investment in infrastructure is needed to improve productivity and economic growth. When it comes to the A5, I hope the Minister will be able to say positive words that will lead to action.

I will also say a word or two about the importance of the logistics sector. As I have mentioned, Rugby is part of the golden triangle, and my constituency has certainly benefited from its geographical location at the centre of England. It contains several large logistics businesses, which has driven economic growth in Rugby, provided many employment opportunities, and helped my constituency become one of the fastest-growing towns in the country. Rugby is home to such household names in the logistics industry as DHL and Hermes, and just over two years ago, Amazon took the decision to invest in Rugby by building one of its fulfilment centres on the outskirts of the town, near the A5 and its junction with the M6.

As well as the numerous employment sites in my constituency that benefit from the A5, there are numerous other large and strategic employment sites in B8 use—logistics and distribution—along the route. I have already mentioned DIRFT, Magna Park and Kingswood Lake, but I will now also mention Sketchley Meadows in Hinckley and Birch Coppice in Tamworth. Previously, I have outlined the importance of the MIRA Technology Park, an enterprise zone that is of course vital to the resurgence of the automotive industry in the midlands; indeed, that manufacturing sector is synonymous with the west midlands.

All the sites that I have referred to are of strategic importance, with many in line for expansion as our region continues to attract investors who are either keen to locate in the west midlands or keen to develop their businesses in the west midlands further. I regularly hear from developers keen to invest along the corridor.

However, a real worry is that growth in investment will be inhibited unless we now take the decision to invest in our strategic transport network. We are fortunate in our location at the centre of England to have generally excellent access to the motorway network, but without further investment to build network capacity and resilience, there is a real danger that we will miss the opportunity to rev up the midlands engine in the way that we would all like.

Alberto Costa: My hon. Friend makes some excellent points about the importance of this trunk road, which provides an alternative route to already congested motorways, for example. Does he agree that the A5 must also have improved capacity to ensure that overflow traffic is taken out of the many rural villages around it?

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend no doubt has constituents who will have experience of that overflow traffic in exactly the same way that I do. I will talk a little later on about how the A5 acts as a relief valve for the M6, but if people cannot move along the A5 in the way that they need to, the danger is that they will seek alternative routes that take them off the trunk road network.

I have already mentioned that the local councils are coming together, demonstrating their desire to grow and develop their employment and housing offer. By investing in this road, central Government can help those councils to meet their growth needs by facilitating a safe, reliable, efficient and resilient A5.

With that bit of resilience in mind, I will talk about the importance of keeping the traffic moving, to which my hon. Friend just referred. We know that there are often many planned and unplanned incidents on the M6, and that when the M6 comes to a halt many vehicles turn to the A5. Indeed, over the last 36 hours, there have been a dozen or so different lane closures on the M6 due to either maintenance work or incidents on the road.

In those circumstances, when traffic migrates from the M6, the A5 struggles to cope in certain situations and creaks under the weight of the additional traffic. That is often compounded by operational issues on the A5 itself, which in turn creates significant problems on local roads, as my hon. Friend has just referred to, with traffic dispersing because drivers seek alternative local routes.

One of the reasons for the lack of resilience, and it is the core of our call to the Minister today, is the variation in the standard of the road along the corridor. It is, in parts, recently constructed dual carriageway, with a great road surface that enables the road to work well. However, in other parts it is a windy A road, a single carriageway with double yellow lines, where the traffic really slows down. It is that variability that is at the heart of the challenge facing the road's users. That situation is aggravated, as the Minister may know, because the road is constrained by old canal and railway bridges. That creates congestion and slows down journey speeds, impacting businesses and commuters, and even impeding emergency vehicles. Along with my colleagues here today, I am arguing that what we really need is the complete dualling of the road between M1 junction 18 and the M6. That is our long-term objective.

On safety, one of the key objectives of National Highways is to reduce casualties on our roads. Sadly, the pressures on the A5, along with the development I mentioned, mean that the road has become a barrier to road users safely accessing economic hubs and other parts of the road network. I spoke about how that has impacted on congestion when incidents occur on other strategic roads but the safety of the road itself is impacted. Many of the junctions—be they roundabouts or road turnings—were not designed to cope with the levels of traffic that they are experiencing. We know that as congestion increases, so does the risk of collision. It can be caused by driver frustration or the limited safety provisions on the single carriageway sections of the road.

Along the corridor—that is, the 53 miles between the M1 and the M6—about a quarter of collisions occur during evening peak hours. Significantly, data demonstrates that the nature of the road, which is of a mixed standard, moving from dual to single carriageway sections with a large number of roundabouts, contributes to the number of collisions. Indeed, across all sections of the road, approximately 40% of the accidents that lead to personal injuries occur at roundabouts, compared with a national average of 10%. That is based on data provided by the police.

The historically fragmented nature of the A5, both through its construction and its inconsistency, can be seen as the heart of the issues with the road. Further or full dualling of the A5 will improve the overall capacity and resilience of the road while improving its safety and performance.

Alberto Costa: My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. Given what he has said, does he agree that we need safety improvements on the A5 for the road to cope with greater capacity? In my constituency, for instance, High Cross and Smockington Hollow junctions are notorious accident blackspots, so I am grateful that he has mentioned the safety issues on the A5.

Mark Pawsey: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. We do want to make the road safer as it is a horrible road for drivers to negotiate.

I also want to talk about sustainability. As part of the wider picture, improving the highways infrastructure should involve cycling and pedestrian routes and the use of public transport. In my constituency, both Rugby Borough Council and Warwickshire County Council are committed to investing in and further developing sustainable transport infrastructure with a view to reducing the congestion on our roads, encouraging healthy living and improving air quality. Those ambitions are shared by both central Government and local councils.

Public transport along the A5 by bus remains extremely limited. I have spoken about the new housing and commercial developments on the road and they are not accessible by public transport. I cycle, and I certainly would not want to ride my bike along the A5. At no point along the part of the road that I am particularly concerned about are there any cycleways, creating further issues around access. All in all, that drives people to use their cars to access sites along the A5, adding to levels of traffic and congestion on the road. By looking at sustainability, we can move traffic from the road. We really ought to consider sustainability when the new developments take place.

To conclude, I hope the debate has reinforced the message that I and my colleagues have been sending to Ministers over many years. Without an upgrade of the A5 in the Midlands, economic growth will be restricted in our area. I hope that I have been able to show that in many ways the corridor has become a victim of the growth near it, with piecemeal improvements and developments made along it. It has not been considered in its entirety, which is what we would like to see. It should be treated as the strategic road that it is. Historically, any improvements have been fragmented in delivery and we now need an upgrade that looks at the A5 in its entirety—at the whole picture—and acts to unlock the potential throughout the corridor.

Our role as midlands MPs is to make certain that the funding to upgrade the A5 provides us with a consistent standard of dual carriageway between the M1 and M6. I hope that I have shown that the road experiences significant peak-hour congestion and will support major growth over the next decades, based on plans that have already been adopted and are emerging from the local councils along the corridor route. Without that action, growth in the midlands will be inhibited and lost.

The Minister will be aware that the midlands engine is revving up and is more than ready to play its part, but it needs the transport infrastructure to match that ambition and drive. I hope that in response to the debate the Minister will be able to reassure residents and businesses that the Government understand and recognise the necessity of an upgrade of the 53-mile corridor from M1 junction 18 in Warwickshire to the M5 at junction 12 in Staffordshire, and that they are listening and will be ready to act.

2.56 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Hosie, and even more of a pleasure to be involved in the debate. I wholeheartedly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) for securing it. I admit that when I came down to Parliament, I never thought one of the things I would become most passionate about would be a road. The colleagues I have worked with, two of whom cannot be here—my hon. Friends the Members for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) and for Nuneaton (Mr Jones)—have inspired me through the work they have done to drive forward why the road is so important.

Unfortunately for some of those listening to the debate, over the next few minutes I shall repeat some of the points that have been made. They are crucial to understanding why the road matters, why we care and why it is needed locally and by the UK. We know the road runs from Wales to London and I, too, want to focus on the A5 corridor, the middle, because that is the most important part. It is the heart of the logistics side; it is the connection from east to west—from the east midlands to the west midlands. Unfortunately, it is acting as a straitjacket to our economic growth and prosperity.

If we get the road right, we will have housing, businesses, growth, levelling up and, above all, happiness. It is one of the few roads that prompt people to come to us and say, “Please sort it out. This would make my life better.” It would improve not only their job prospects but their business prospects, commute and daily living. That is why the road is so important, and why I want to speak about the section between Cannock Chase and Rugby, which intersects Hinckley and Bosworth. If we get it right, there is a real chance to make a difference.

Why does it matter? As we have heard, the A5 corridor affects 1 million people and supports almost 500,000 jobs, 10% of the jobs in the midlands. We know that there are 25,000 vehicles on its busiest sections, and that one third of those vehicles using the A5 are classified as HGVs. As we have heard, local authorities are planning for more than 100,000 new houses and 190,000 new jobs to be created by 2033. We need the infrastructure to be able to deliver that. That leads us on to its economic importance. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby rightly pointed out, it has a GVA of £22 billion. That is

10% of the Midlands Connect area, a substantial amount, but I would like to add some further facts. On the corridor, 38% of the jobs are in the economic sector that relies on the strategic network and 185,000 jobs, equivalent to 11% of the jobs in the region, rely on the strategic network. That is a huge amount for joining up the midlands.

The problem is resilience and reliability. A critical incident, as defined by National Highways, happens every eight weeks. When an incident happens, there is on average a five-hour delay to resolve it. In my constituency, 15% of those incidents happen when our bridge is hit. The Watling Street bridge was unfortunately the most bashed bridge in Britain last year. We have relinquished that title—we are now sixth—but an incident was happening every two weeks. When that happens, there is on average a six-hour delay to clear it, which means misery and suffering for those around the incident and for those in the villages around our area. Congestion goes up and people look for rat runs to beat their sat-nav throughout the constituency. That is a real problem, because the roads are not designed to deal with HGVs and the extra traffic that comes from such a delay.

When it comes to the functioning of the road itself, it does not even do that very well. The corridor is slow and unreliable. The average speed for the corridor is 40 mph, but in some sections, at the peak, it gets down to 10 mph. Midlands Connect has said

“there is up to a 20 mph difference between the fastest and slowest journey time, making it challenging for users to plan for their journeys...this does not meet Midlands Connect’s reliability conditional output that journey times should not be more than 20% higher than the average journey time for all days.”

That is why it matters, but why do we care about it? We care because we feel that this road is forgotten. Many of my colleagues—both former representatives of Hinckley and Bosworth and those who cannot be here today—have raised this issue in the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton has raised the issue of capacity at the Dodwells and Longshoot junctions, as well as the issue of safety at Longshoot and Woodford Lane. My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire has campaigned tirelessly about congestion and how, if we get this road sorted, we can increase housing. The A5 Partnership, Midlands Connect, the businesses, the county council, the borough council—all parties—have come together and said why this road is important. It sometimes feels like we are not heard.

The feeling was compounded in August 2021 when the long-awaited Dodwells island to Longshoot dual carriageway, promised in 2014, was scrapped. To the people of Hinckley and Bosworth and the surrounding areas, that felt like a body blow. However, we pledged to fight on. There is light at the end of the tunnel. We were lucky enough to secure £20 million for RIS2, and we are now looking at RIS3. The light at the end of the tunnel was the assessment that it would not be an efficient use of taxpayers’ money. That says to me that if there were to be an improvement, it would be right not to spend the money on that section if we get the 53 miles of dualling that we all require.

I come back again to the most bashed bridge in Britain, because it creates misery. For years it has been raised up. Signage and alternative routes have been talked about and we are finally getting closer to an answer, which is lowering the road to get it sorted. I am grateful

[Dr Luke Evans]

to all the agencies working to put that in place. However, if that fails and the A5 does not go through, our community will feel stranded and forgotten about again. It matters to people—getting to work, getting their kids to school, improving journey times and their ability to get to their businesses, recruit more people and sell more goods. It joins one side of the country to the other. That is why it matters. It matters even more because the people around it have suffered the effects of the road not working. The wider communities have suffered when people cut through the likes of Twycross. We have had many an injury and death on some of the roads around my constituency, caused by people having to navigate a different road and not understanding where they are going. It leads to speeding, deterioration in the road and concern that our countryside cannot cope.

What do we need? Locally, we need the dualling and the upgrade as soon as possible. I am hopeful that with RIS3 ministerial point one will lead to a ministerial decision, allowing us to go ahead and make improvements to the road. It is a Roman road, although it does not lead to Rome; it leads to London and Westminster. Westminster needs to hear that the million people living around the A5 are saying that we need this improvement. We need the straitjacket to be removed, or the corset to be loosened, so that we can level up our ability to produce housing, prosperity, jobs and happiness. Minister, release the corset and let us be happy!

3.5 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. Before the debate started, you reminded us of the famous folk song about the A5. I have the answer—it was Christy Moore, with “Go, Move, Shift”:

“Born in the middle of the afternoon
In a horsedrawn carriage on the old A-5
The big twelve wheeler shook my bed
You can’t stay here the policeman said...
Go, move, shift”.

I win the brownie points on that quiz of yours, Mr Hosie.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): And now can we get back on topic?

Mike Kane: I will, Mr Hosie.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on securing the debate about an issue on which he has campaigned for some time. It is of huge importance to his constituency, and to that of the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans)—what an impassioned plea he made! The hon. Gentleman was like some latter-day Henry Tudor on Bosworth field: ending the Plantagenet dynasty, slaying Richard III—the last King to go into battle—and making a plea for investment in his constituency. His was an eloquently framed speech.

There is a vast amount of consensus on the need for more action to be taken, and I hope the Minister will consider all points raised today. As has been pointed out, the A5 is a strategic route that generates about £22 billion each year. It brings huge benefits to the UK economy and not least to the regional economies in the

midlands. It is a vital road corridor that connects businesses with ports, airports and motorways, and it supports major employment sites such as Magna Park and the MIRA enterprise zone.

I am acutely aware of the ongoing capacity issues on the A5 in the region. Although the pandemic has altered commuting patterns, congestion on the A5 in the midlands still averages approximately 25 seconds per vehicle per mile, I am told. On some sections congestion is even more severe, reaching over a minute and a half per vehicle per mile at some points.

As hon. Members have said, the cost of congestion is plain to see. It causes undue stress and, as the hon. Member for Bosworth said, a lack of happiness—although I have never heard about that in the context of a road—because of the extended journey times for motorists. It also contributes to increased carbon emissions and poor air quality for local residents, which I see all too often in my constituency around the M56.

Furthermore, research shows that traffic in the UK costs the economy billions of pounds every year. National Highways and the Department for Transport have highlighted the severe congestion issues on the A5 and identified the need to improve traffic flow. However, that is not being backed up by real action; hon. Members representing their constituencies in the midlands will be disappointed by the lack of progress on increasing capacity on the A5.

RIS2, running from 2020 to 2025, had committed to widening the A5 into a dual carriageway from Dodwells island to Longshoot, but, in a hammer blow to the local area, those plans were scrapped last year by National Highways and the Department. National Highways has said that the improvements will be considered in the context of wider proposals in RIS3 to improve capacity on the A5 from Hinckley to Tamworth.

In the meantime, congestion on the A5 remains at significant levels. Motorists will rightly question why they must wait until 2025 for funding to improve the traffic flow even to be considered. That is just one of a number of potential improvements to the A5. For example, the hon. Member for Bosworth told us that his constituency has Britain’s most bashed bridge—the alliteration trips off the tongue whenever he says it, and he raises it time and again.

Many Members will be eagerly anticipating the publication of RIS3 and hope for a coherent strategy to tackle congestion on the A5. However, given the broken promises so far, commitments may have to be taken with a pinch of salt. Wider investment is needed in our road network, not just to tackle today’s congestion, but to future-proof our major corridors. National Highways has projected that traffic on its roads will increase by 20% between now and 2050, but there is a complete lack of planning to prepare the strategic road network for the capacity that is needed.

We have to face this challenge together as the nations of the United Kingdom. I have not checked with the House of Commons Library, but I believe there are now about 40 million licensed vehicles on our roads. The figure has almost doubled in 30 years. At some stage, we have to make a decision. Yes, we have to help car drivers, but we must address how Government can begin to tackle that growth. We cannot continue with such vehicle numbers on our ever-shrinking highway network. It is important to lay that out.

Labour supports investment in our roads. Under this Government, the state of our roads has rapidly deteriorated. The issues discussed today are examples of wider endemic problems. From our country lanes to motorways, our road network has suffered more than a decade of under-investment. We need only look at what happened to highways maintenance funding last year: the Government slashed it, on average, by 22% across England. In the west midlands, the cut was even steeper. For instance, Government funding to pay for pothole repairs fell by a staggering 27% in the region, the second biggest cut in England.

We are now seeing the long-term nature of the cuts to road funding. Many local councils have been told that they can expect the cuts to their road maintenance grants to be embedded for the remainder of this Parliament. Last year, the annual local authority road maintenance survey found that it would take 11 years to clear the maintenance backlog, if local authorities had the funding and resources to do the work.

Labour has committed to rebuilding the infrastructure our communities depend on, as part of our contract with the British people. That starts by fixing the mess on our roads. We will invest in our strategic road network and our local roads alike to build a transport network that is fit for purpose, both now and in the future.

3.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) is a passionate advocate for his constituency. I congratulate him on securing this important debate, on working with local leaders and colleagues in the House and on articulating so clearly the need to increase capacity and to make other improvements on the A5 in the midlands.

I do not think there has ever before been such a comprehensive discussion of the need to improve roads. We have discussed the issue economically, environmentally, socially and culturally—even a song has been written about this road. I am sure we all appreciated the rendition from the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane). My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby set out why improvements to the A5 are so important to his constituents and to the wider area. It is good that Members are working together.

As we know, the A5 is an ancient road of 252 miles, yet just 15% of it is dualled. We heard the rationale for improving that percentage. Significant housing development proposed in north Warwickshire, Hinckley, Tamworth, Bosworth and Nuneaton and Bedworth, including sites in the immediate vicinity of the A5, add to the reasons why the road needs to be improved. The average daily traffic figure on the A5—21,338—is considerable.

The A5 is part of a strategic east-west corridor running from London to Holyhead in Anglesey. As we have heard this afternoon, it links towns across the midlands, including Milton Keynes, Rugby, Lutterworth, Hinckley, Nuneaton and Tamworth. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) spoke to me at length yesterday about the need to improve the road, and he specifically mentioned the areas that most concern him: the Dodwells island connecting to the A47, the Longshoot junction and the Woodford Lane junction. He talked to me about the closures on the M6 and their

impact on the A5. As we have heard today, rat runs are created in local communities when there are problems on the A5.

The A5 is a core artery bisecting the golden triangle of logistics distribution centres, supermarkets and high street stores in the midlands. Spanning from Northamptonshire, up the M1 to East Midlands airport and as far west as the Tamworth area, the golden triangle is bustling with big logistics names. As well as being in proximity to the huge distribution centres of supermarkets and high street stores—with Daventry in the south, Leicester in the north-east and Birmingham in the west—the corridor remains a key artery for communities in the midlands and for jobs in major employment sites such as Magna Park and the MIRA enterprise zone, which I had the pleasure of visiting thanks to the invitation from my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans). I saw for myself the innovation happening there. As we decarbonise the transport system and think about the future of self-driving vehicles, automation and connected vehicles, the site will become even more essential to the transition. As he articulated so well, the work being done by the midlands engine is critical to the economic, social and environmental prospects of this country.

The Government recognise the role that the A5 plays. It is a key piece of infrastructure that supports and provides resilience to nearby locations, which is why we are spending £24 billion on our motorways and trunk A roads in England in the five years between 2020 and 2025, as part of the second road investment strategy. RIS2 builds on the £17.6 billion in the first RIS, covering 2015 to 2020—a then record. Of that £24 billion, £12 billion is being spent on the operation, maintenance and renewal of existing networks, including beginning multi-road period programmes of structural renewals and concrete road surface replacement.

More than £10 billion is being spent on improving the performance of the network, supporting the Government's levelling-up agenda and underpinning national and regional growth. The core principle of our strategy is to create a road network that is safe, accessible and reliable for all users, and that meets the needs of those living alongside the network. Although investment has an important role in achieving that, the road investment strategy also includes challenging performance targets that must be met. I recognise the frustration of my hon. Friends, the business community and residents that the A5 Dodwells to Longshoot widening scheme commitment in RIS1 was not started in road period 1 and was instead incorporated into proposals in RIS2 for a more extensive improvement to the corridor.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth raised the challenge of Britain's most bashed bridge. National Highways is in discussions with the developer about the possibility of lowering the carriageway in the vicinity of the low bridge. The discussions are ongoing, and I know he needs no encouragement from me to do what he does best, along with colleagues in the A5 area: to continue engaging with National Highways on this important matter.

In championing the need for improvements, the work of the A5 Partnership has been exemplary, and I reassure hon. Members that this work will continue to be fully considered by officials within the Department and National Highways as part of the canon of evidence for developing our third road investment strategy, RIS3, which will

[Trudy Harrison]

cover 2025 to 2030. It includes informing decision making on the proposed A5 Hinckley to Tamworth scheme—one of 33 schemes in the pipeline that are currently being developed for possible delivery in RIS3. The likely cost of the scheme is substantial, in excess of £1 billion in all likelihood. As my hon. Friends will appreciate, with such large sums involved, investment decisions need to be taken in the round to ensure we maximise value for taxpayers.

My hon. Friends have set out the importance of this road improvement for the economic viability and social happiness of the area. Individual pipeline schemes will be considered alongside future operations, maintenance and renewal priorities and how we respond to environmental pressures and opportunities, planning for a future of connected autonomous vehicles as well as small-scale improvements. In practice, those decisions will not be made until the final road investment strategy is set in 2024.

Mark Pawsey: One of our key asks is that this 53-mile section of road is looked at as a whole, rather than in individual pieces. There is a marvellous precedent in the midlands with the work being done on the A46—plans are coming forward for the final roundabout in my constituency—which will provide a continuous road from the M5 in the south-west at Evesham all the way through to the M69 and then the M1 at Leicester, providing a south-west to north-east link. That road has been looked at as a whole and will be a complete, uninterrupted road. Can we have the same for the A5?

Trudy Harrison: I am sure my colleague in the other place, Baroness Vere the roads Minister, will be listening to this debate. I reiterate how effectively my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby is championing this cause, and he is being taken seriously. Also, this is not all we are doing for the A5. As I am sure hon. Members are aware, National Highways has committed to delivering another scheme for the A5. The Dordon to Atherstone scheme is set to deliver improvements that will unlock the potential for 4,000 homes. National Highways will deliver that scheme, and the design of the improvements can be tied into the wider options being considered for the route. National Highways will also be completing safety improvements to the A5 Northampton Road this month.

I appreciate hon. Members' concerns about the current operation of the A5 and its impacts on proposed growth in the region. My hon. Friends and I agree that efficient, reliable transport is a catalyst for enterprise and enables growth. Better connectivity means greater economic opportunity and all the benefits it delivers for communities.

I know that my hon. Friend for Rugby and other hon. Friends who advocate for improvements on the A5 are passionate about investment in the midlands for their constituents, and I recognise it is in everyone's interest to mitigate the barriers to growth. That is why the Department is working closely with National Highways to fully understand congestion issues along the length of the A5 and how its key congestion pinch points can potentially be mitigated, including the A43-A5 Tove roundabout, the A5-A426 Gibbet Hill roundabout and junction 1 of the M69. I assure hon. Members that National Highways will continue to work closely with

the local highway authorities and stakeholders to understand and deliver improvements where they are needed, so that the region's potential can be truly realised.

As we look to the future of the network, National Highways has just finished the formal evidence-gathering phase of the third round of route strategies, which will inform its assessment of the current performance of the network and its needs. Those strategies provide an important input, alongside strategic studies and other evidence-gathering mechanisms, in informing decisions about further investment on the strategic road network beyond 2025. The route strategies review performance, pressures and opportunities on every part of the network, and provide a significant opportunity to consider the needs of the A5 corridor and, in particular, reinforce the case for improving the Hinckley to Tamworth section. The input of Midlands Connect and the A5 Partnership was an important contribution to that process and, as we have heard, the input from my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and his colleagues was an important contribution to the series of roundtable meetings that the roads Minister, Baroness Vere, hosted in the autumn.

I thank my hon. Friend once again for the work he does with Midlands Connect and the A5 Partnership to ensure the overwhelming support for improvements is well represented within Government. I welcome the integrated approach with local community leaders, sub-national transport bodies and transport authorities to demonstrate a united front on the need for investment, which is essential for building the case for improvements along this stretch of the strategic road network. The formal window for feedback through the route strategies feedback tool came to a close at the end of December 2021. It is vital for National Highways to understand and prioritise the issues that matter most for users of the road network. I encourage my hon. Friend to continue making the case for investment in the strategic roads that matter most, and the important engagement that is already under way with National Highways across all these issues is making a tremendous difference.

I conclude by thanking my hon. Friends the Members for Rugby and for Bosworth for this debate. In preparation, I learned much about the 252 miles of the A5 and I hope they are satisfied with my response to their concerns. We recognise the vital importance of the A5 in supporting all aspects of the regional and national economy, and the concerns and views that have been expressed will be dealt with as matters of the utmost importance when considering how to improve the A5 now and in the future.

3.26 pm

Mark Pawsey: I am grateful to the Minister for her remarks. She has appreciated the passion in the midlands for improvements to this road. It is a piecemeal road; we have great bits that have recently been improved, and other bits that are single carriageway and have not had any work done on them for 50 years. I hope we have persuaded the Minister of the strategic importance of improvements, and their impact on growth in an area that is very sympathetic to attracting businesses, new housing and other such developments. We very much hope that the Minister and her team will take this forward, and that we get the shiny new road our constituents deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of increasing capacity and other improvements to the A5 in the Midlands.

3.27 pm

Sitting suspended.

Queen Elizabeth Hospital, King's Lynn

4 pm

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I will call James Wild to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. The Member in charge will not have the opportunity to wind up, as is the convention in 30-minute debates.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered quality of care and the estate at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, King's Lynn.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this important debate, which gives me the opportunity to highlight the significant improvements at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, while once again making the compelling case for it to be one of the new hospital schemes that the Government have committed to building. I also want to recognise the close interest that my hon. Friend the Minister has taken in QEH and to thank him for the many meetings and discussions we have had about it so far. Of course, I also encourage him to back the bid.

QEH serves 330,000 people across Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire, providing a comprehensive range of specialist, acute and community-based services. It is a busy hospital, with 55,000 in-patient admissions, a quarter of a million out-patient appointments and 70,000 emergency department admissions last year. However, QEH has suffered from poor Care Quality Commission ratings and an historic lack of investment, and has therefore been in special measures for some time. However, under the leadership of Caroline Shaw, the chief executive, and the chairman, Steve Barnett—who is moving on shortly, having done a lot of good work—things have changed.

In the last three years, there have been significant improvements in care. However, you do not have to take my word for it, Mr Hosie; that was the verdict of the CQC's report a month ago. The core services it inspected—medicine, urgent and emergency care, and critical care—were all rated good overall. Indeed, critical care was recognised as having outstanding elements in many areas. That means that QEH is now rated good in three domains: caring, well led and effective. The CQC found that

“Staff provided good care and treatment...treated patients with compassion and kindness, respected their privacy and dignity, took account of...individual needs...and made it easy for people to give feedback.”

The report shows how far QEH has come. As a result, the Care Quality Commission's chief inspector of hospitals has recommended that QEH come out of special measures, which is very welcome for the area.

It is frankly remarkable that all this has been achieved during a period when covid posed such huge challenges to QEH and other hospitals, and to other parts of the health and social care sector. This has not happened by luck; it is due to the leadership, hard work and commitment of all the staff at QEH. I have seen that dedication at first hand when I have met doctors, nurses, the infection control teams, the porters and all the others who make up the hospital during my regular visits. I commend them for all that they have achieved in the report. As the CQC said, staff were

“passionate about...providing the best possible care for patients”,

[James Wild]

and leaders understood

“the priorities and issues the trust faced”

and were

“visible and approachable...for patients and staff.”

Clearly further improvements are required, as the hospital recognises, but it is important that we acknowledge the huge step forward that has been taken, as reflected in the report.

Those improvements have been made despite the decaying and ageing buildings that staff and patients have to experience and operate in. As my hon. Friend the Minister knows, QEH is one of the best-buy hospitals and has major issues with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete planks—which I think we should refer to as RAAC planks for the rest of the debate—which are structurally deficient. The hospital was built with a 30-year design life, but it is now in its 42nd year. Some 79% of hospital estate buildings have RAAC planks, and I am sorry to say that it is the most propped hospital in the country, with 470 steel and timber supports across 56 parts of the hospital.

Being in a ward or another part of the hospital, surrounded by props holding up the roof, is a poor experience for patients. It makes it harder for staff to care for them. It is not something that we should accept, and we do not. This is a serious situation, and the trust's risk register has a red rating for direct risk to life and the safety of patients, visitors and staff, due to the potentially catastrophic risk of failure of the roof structure. Last year, the critical care unit had to close for some weeks due to precisely those safety issues. The urgent need for a new hospital, and the strength of that case, is underlined by the fact that over a third of all reported RAAC issues in the east of England were at QEH in the last year.

I know that my hon. Friend recognises the seriousness of the situation, and the £20.6 million of emergency capital funding that he approved last year is very welcome. That is making a difference: a new endoscopy unit is taking shape to modernise facilities, and to create space to enable installation of fail-safe roof supports. In addition, there is £3 million of funding for a west Norfolk eye centre, which along with other projects, including digital, means that QEH is currently delivering a more than £30 million capital programme.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for securing this incredibly important debate. It is a very poor situation to have a hospital in Norfolk in this position, when it clearly needs a rebuild. I thank my hon. Friend for everything he has done; we would not be in this position without his tireless work to raise this matter with the Secretary of State. May I raise one point? We have three hospitals in Norfolk. We want a new hospital at QEH. That will benefit not just his constituents, but those all over Norfolk, particularly in my constituency of North Norfolk, who will also use its fantastic services when it is rebuilt.

James Wild: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support and words. He is absolutely right; I think his constituency has the oldest average age in the country, and that poses particular needs. My constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), who has joined to support the debate,

also have challenges, so we need to ensure that the care is in place. There is also a lot of planned housing growth in the area. The demand is strong across our constituencies, and in Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire, which is why it is important to show the strength of support for the hospital across Norfolk and beyond.

When compared with the turnover, the level of the capital programme is significant, and it is important to acknowledge that the programme is being managed well. QEH has submitted a further bid for £18 million for an orthopaedic centre, as part of the funding to tackle the backlog. Given that it is the area with one of the longest waiting lists for QEH, I strongly endorse that bid, and encourage the Minister to approve it when it comes to his desk. Seeing is believing. When the Secretary of State visits QEH—which he has agreed to and I hope will happen soon—he will see those improvements, but he will also see the props and the very real need for investment. My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) will be able to join him on that occasion or another, as he will be very welcome.

As well as the structural issues, the hospital has outgrown its footprint. The emergency department sees 70,000 patients a year—more than double what it was designed for. The layout of the hospital does not meet modern care pathways, with too few consulting rooms, and wards well below the recommended size.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I wish to add my voice to the support he received from my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), and to highlight the importance of this hospital as a regional centre of excellence. It does not support only the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), but also those of North Norfolk, Broadland and further afield.

I pose this question: what impact does receiving care in a building where the ceiling is maintained by acrow props have on the patient's confidence in the care received?

James Wild: My hon. Friend gets to the nub of the issue, which is the impact of this situation on patients. The previous Secretary of State for Health and Social Care came to the hospital, saw that and spoke to patients in those beds. They made light-hearted remarks, but they were concerned about the safety of the building after seeing props and timber supports. Of course, the trust is doing all that it can to manage that risk, but the risk of catastrophic failure remains, which is why it is rated red on the risk register.

The hospital cannot cope with the current demand. NHS modelling shows a 64% increase in overall floor space is needed to maintain services and meet future demand, with lots of housing planned in the area. In short, QEH needs to be replaced. The case is compelling to take this once-in-a-generation opportunity to have a hospital fit for the future. QEH has submitted proposals to the new hospitals programme for a single-phase new build on the existing site to meet current and future demand. The plans put forward would eliminate RAAC, and transform and modernise local healthcare, integrating primary, community, mental health, acute, social care and the third sector in a health and wellbeing village.

However, this is not about having shiny new buildings for their own sake; it is about delivering better health outcomes in some of the most deprived areas in the

country that the Government have recognised as priority 1 areas for levelling up. It is also about an anchor institution—the QEH in west Norfolk—combining with the new school of nursing studies, which will be funded through the Government's town deal, to help the NHS workforce by boosting local opportunities to develop skills and careers in our healthcare sector. It is also about promoting sustainability by using modern methods of construction and net zero principles, and maximising the use of digital technology.

It is important to recognise that the trust going from inadequate to good in the well-led domain in this inspection is a significant achievement, which provides confidence that this is a trust capable of delivering the new hospital that the patients and staff in west Norfolk need. A lot of hard work and engagement has gone into developing the plans and the scheme is highly deliverable, with a strategic outline case well advanced and on track to go to the June board meeting.

QEH's bid is backed by 4,000 staff at the hospital. Stuart Dark—the leader of West Norfolk Borough Council—as well as all the councillors and the county council are supportive, as is the Norfolk and Waveney integrated care system, and at least seven right hon. and hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for North Norfolk and for Broadland. The Prime Minister's chief of staff—the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay)—and the Foreign Secretary also back the bid, and it enjoys local support, with more than 15,000 people having signed a petition backing a new hospital. It is essential that we have an acute hospital in this geographic area. The plans that have been put forward would deliver major improvements to care, patient outcomes and staff experiences. An alternative multi-phase approach has also been put forward. It would, of course, be an improvement on the status quo, but it would not deliver the same benefits or value for money as a single-phase build and would not be delivered in the required timeframe.

My constituents in North West Norfolk are frustrated by the delays in the timelines for the new hospital selection process, as am I. That will not come as any surprise to my hon. Friend the Minister; I confess publicly to bugging him and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State repeatedly for decisions on the shortlisting of these hospitals. I press the Minister today: when can we expect to hear a decision on the hospitals that will go through to the next phase of the programme? What implications does the delay have for the final decision on the eight schemes to be selected, and for getting design and construction under way? I encourage him to do all he can to move this process forward as rapidly as possible.

Over the last three years, there have been real changes at QEH and patients are getting better care. The leadership has demonstrated that it can drive sustained improvements, and move to a position where staff feel supported and valued, and where there is a strong focus on improved patient care and outcomes. Now we have an opportunity to build—literally—on that progress, to provide the major investment to modernise the hospital, to improve care further and to support the trust's strategy to be the best rural district general hospital.

The Government and the Department of Health and Social Care have already committed to removing deficient RAAC from the estate by 2035. However, experts on

RAAC have said that for QEH the end-of-life deadline is 2030 and that the risk will only worsen. There comes a point where it no longer makes sense or represents value for money to keep propping up the roof. I would contend that we are past that point. Indeed, in the report that set out the significant improvements needed to QEH, the CQC said that

“The trust's most substantial risk was the safety of the roof structure”

and that there is a

“need for long term solutions to the estate problems.”

As well as having serious structural issues, the current hospital cannot meet the current or future demand. The only long-term solution is a new hospital to deal with the RAAC issues, meet demand and serve patients. By selecting QEH as one of the eight new hospital schemes, that inevitable need for replacement will become part of a funded programme, rather than an unplanned demand requiring repeated emergency funding. I urge the Government to include QEH as one of the schemes. The people of North West Norfolk and beyond deserve nothing less.

4.13 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and to respond to this debate, which was secured by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), about the quality of care and the estate at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, King's Lynn.

As my hon. Friend has already alluded to, this is an important subject for him. It is rare that I pass him in the corridors of this place without him gently but firmly drawing me aside to raise this issue with me. I know that he does so because it matters hugely to his constituents. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) said, it also matters hugely to other people living in the region—the wider Norfolk area—and beyond.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk rightly highlights the close interest that a large number of right hon. and hon. Members take in this subject. Indeed, I am conscious that even some Members in their lordships' House take a close interest in this issue. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) for his words. He is absolutely right to highlight the dedication of our hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk to this cause. His constituents and, indeed, those represented by all hon. Members here today are lucky to have them, as they continue forcefully and firmly to argue the cause of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, King's Lynn.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk will be aware, the Government are backing our NHS with a significant capital settlement that will create a step change in the quality and efficiency of care up and down the country, including in Norfolk. We are pleased to confirm that an initial £3.7 billion has been provided over a four-year period—this spending review period—to begin making progress on delivering 48 new hospitals by 2030, with 30 of the hospitals already announced to be built outside London and the south-east. I am pleased that six of the 48 hospitals are already in construction and one has already been completed. Of course, this hospital building programme is in addition to the 70 upgrades, worth £1.7 billion, that are part of

[Edward Argar]

the wider programme of capital investment. Those commitments will result in outdated infrastructure being replaced by facilities for staff and patients that are at the cutting edge of modern technology, innovation and sustainability.

My hon. Friend is, as always, passionate in putting the case for his local hospital to be among the next eight to be announced—I will turn to the process and timelines for that shortly. As he highlights, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital King's Lynn NHS Foundation Trust has been provided in recent times with significant national funding, including £5 million in 2021-22 from our targeted investment fund for the establishment of an eye care unit at the Queen Elizabeth and a modular endoscopy unit, and £2.65 million in 2020-21 for the emergency department expansion works and to address backlog maintenance across its locations. My hon. Friend advocated for both those investments.

Let me turn to a point that I know is a significant concern for my hon. Friend. We remain publicly committed to eradicating reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete from the NHS estate by 2035-36—I note my hon. Friend's point highlighting that in his view and the view of others, that needs to happen more swiftly—and to protecting patient and staff safety in the interim period. As he said, we awarded the Queen Elizabeth £20.7 million this financial year as part of SR20 £110 million ring fenced funding to address the most serious and immediate risks posed by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. In addition, further funding confirmed in the autumn Budget and spending review will allow for the continuation of this remediation work in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital and, indeed, on the wider NHS estate.

Let me turn to the next eight new hospitals. The proposal for trusts to submit an expression of interest to be one of the next eight was announced last year and, as my hon. Friend knows, his local hospital submitted its expression of interest. We have been reviewing all submissions against our robust assessment process, to identify a longlist of schemes to progress to the next phase. We will communicate with trusts in due course about the next stage of the process, and will announce the selected eight schemes later in the year.

I am conscious that my hon. Friend, his local trust and his constituents will be keen to see that progress as swiftly as possible. There is a challenge there. We want to ensure that the assessment is fair and rigorous. I am also sensitive to the upcoming purdah period for local election campaigns across the country, but I do take my hon. Friend's point about the need for speed. I suspect that his local trust will wish to know swiftly whether it is successful or unsuccessful and, if it is successful, what it needs to do for the next stage. I hope that my hon. Friend will appreciate that I cannot comment, beyond those process points, on the specific bid that his local trust has submitted, save to say that it will receive very, very careful consideration in that process.

Let me turn to, more broadly, the quality of patient care and the points that my hon. Friend made in that respect. The CQC plays an important role, as he knows, in ensuring that NHS providers meet the standards of care expected by patients, families and carers. I recognise that the Queen Elizabeth had long struggled with financial and performance challenges, as previously identified by

the CQC. The trust had previously been removed from special measures, now known as the recovery support programme, after being placed in the regime between 2013 and 2015, only for the CQC to subsequently recommend that it should fall back into those measures in 2018 when the regulator identified concerns across several core services.

Recent inspections in December 2021 and January 2022, which my hon. Friend highlighted, found significant improvements in the governance, leadership and culture of the trust. Although its overall rating was "requires improvement", this represents a significant step forward from its previous rating of "inadequate". I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the hard work and commitment of the chief executive, Caroline Shaw, the rest of the leadership of the trust and, crucially, all the staff at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, King's Lynn, who have clearly worked incredibly hard through even more challenging circumstances than they would usually encounter in the course of their work, and still made improvements in patient care and in the CQC rating. I pay tribute to all of them for the work they have done.

I welcome the commitment given to the CQC by the leadership to ensure that those improvements are sustainable and continue to be built on. As we would expect, the CQC will monitor the trust's performance in order that the improvements are embedded and that further improvements in care and services are made for the benefit of patients and their families.

James Wild: I appreciate that my hon. Friend cannot get into the specifics, but can he assure me that the fact that this is the No.1 bid for the east of England will play heavily in the consideration of whether it will be on the shortlist and then chosen as one of the eight schemes?

Edward Argar: As my hon. Friend knows, each region will feed in its views about which of the schemes and bids in its area are the highest priority. Without prejudging that assessment process, I hope I can reassure him that one factor that I know he considers to be of significant importance—RAAC—will be considered. Patient safety and the safety of the buildings will be a factor in the analysis of which bids should go forward to the longlist, but I do not want to go further than that at this point, however much he may charmingly seek to tempt me to do so.

Elective recovery is an area of real focus for the Department and for the whole Government, and I am aware that covid-19 has placed an unprecedented strain on routine and planned care, with waiting lists in England reaching a record high, at just over 6 million in January 2022. I understand that 19,366 of those patients are waiting for treatment at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital.

In February, the NHS published the "Delivery plan for tackling the COVID-19 backlog of elective care", which set out a clear vision for how the NHS will recover and expand elective services over the next three years. That delivery plan commits to eradicate waits of longer than a year for elective care by March 2025. Within that, by July 2022, no one will wait longer than two years, and we will aim to eliminate waits of over 18 months by April 2023 and of over 65 weeks by March 2024.

To support elective recovery specifically, the Department plans to spend more than £8 billion from 2022-23 to 2024-25, in addition to the £2 billion elective recovery

fund and £700 million targeted investment fund already made available this year to help drive up and protect elective activity. Taken together, this funding could deliver the equivalent of around 9 million more checks, scans and procedures, and will mean that the NHS in England can aim to deliver around 30% more elective activity by 2024-25 than it was delivering before the pandemic.

In highlighting the extra resources that we are putting into our NHS, it is vital to understand that this is not about the inputs; it is about the outcomes for patients and how those resources are used wisely to deliver improved patient outcomes and improved experiences for patients, with shorter waits. With regard to what is needed to achieve those outcomes, a significant part of that funding will be invested in staff, in terms of both capacity and skills.

I understand that an orthopaedic unit bid for about £18 million has been submitted by my hon. Friend's local hospital trust. That is in the context of the £5.9 billion elective recovery funding, and the £1.5 billion from that for capacity and social hub improvements. Those bids will be carefully considered. They will need to meet the recommendations arising from the pilots that took place in London and the getting it right first time review, but I certainly look forward to considering the bid from my hon. Friend's trust in due course.

Duncan Baker: Does the Minister know that the Queen Elizabeth Hospital was named after the Queen Mother? As it is Queen Elizabeth's platinum jubilee this year, does he agree that it would be a fitting tribute to give the green light to rebuilding a hospital that is named after her mother?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is even more dextrous than our hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk in seeking to tempt me into an indiscretion or a prejudgment of the application process and consideration. I hear what he says and he makes his point eloquently, but I will not be drawn while that analysis and assessment of the bids is under way.

Ambulance services, like other emergency care services in the NHS, have come under significant pressure, as hon. Members will know. In February 2022, the service answered over 764,000 calls to 999—an increase of 13% on the number of calls in the same month before the pandemic. High levels of demand on the emergency care system, alongside the need for infection prevention and control measures, have resulted in higher instances of delays in the handover of ambulance patients to A&E in some areas.

I reassure hon. Members that significant support is in place for acute trusts, to help address handover delays. NHS England and Improvement and its regional teams are working with local systems—in this case, with the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk—to improve their patient handover processes, helping ambulances get swiftly back on the road. Ministers are in regular contact with NHSEI on the performance of the emergency care system, including the ambulance service and accident and emergency departments.

In conclusion, I once again pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk and all my hon. Friends who have spoken in this brief but very important debate for the work that they are doing to champion the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, King's Lynn. As I say, his constituents are incredibly lucky to have such a champion of their cause, of healthcare in his constituency, and of investment in his local hospital, and I look forward to continuing working with him to ensure that the quality of healthcare his constituents receive is the best the NHS can provide. I note his very kind offer, which has been reiterated to me, to visit him in sunny Norfolk—as I suspect it will be in the coming months—to see his local hospital. If I am able to do so, I will be delighted to visit.

Question put and agreed to.

Physical Education

4.30 pm

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered physical education as a core subject in schools.

As always, I am delighted to have you in the Chair, Mr Hosie, for this important and, I hope, enthralling debate at the end of the day on physical education in our schools. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

To begin, I thank personally all 386 members of the public who so far, in just 48 hours, have taken the time to respond to the survey distributed by the Chamber Engagement team, sharing their experiences and ideas on PE as a core subject. I also thank students of the Bishop of Hereford's Bluecoat School who, as part of the Pupils 2 Parliament programme run by former children's director Dr Roger Morgan OBE, contributed their views and proposals. I am extremely grateful to them. That demonstrates the significant and rising interest in this crucial aspect of school, and growing recognition that the status quo is not delivering for children in the context of the modern world in which we live, in particular for those with special educational needs and disabilities or from more deprived backgrounds.

I am also grateful to the Minister, whom I know, from our early morning runs together, is as passionate as I am about the power of PE as a springboard to a lifelong love of sport and physical activity. Indeed, the Government have an ongoing commitment to which I am sure he will refer. The £320 million a year primary PE and sport premium, the 2019 manifesto pledge to invest in primary PE teaching and the new £30 million of funding to help schools open their sports facilities are all demonstrations of the desire to see improvements in participation, performance and prolonged engagement into adulthood with physical activity and sport among children of school age and beyond.

Last year, I chaired the PE taskforce—I thank Sue Wilkinson, the chief executive of the Association for Physical Education, and her team for their support—and it laid bare that this is happening at a time when children's physical fitness and their mental health and wellbeing are all heading in the wrong direction, unfortunately. A Lords Select Committee report, "A national plan for sport, health and wellbeing", which was published in December 2021, cited data from the Active Lives annual survey showing that of 2.3 million children in England—I emphasise that I am speaking about England and English schools—almost a third, or 31.3%, are doing less than 30 minutes of activity a day. It also found that girls and children from deprived socioeconomic backgrounds are the most likely to have lower activity levels.

We have also seen a growing trend of obese children in both reception and year 6, leading to one in five secondary school pupils falling into that category. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the situation has got worse since the pandemic, with a surge in numbers of children being referred to mental health services, including a rise of 77% in severe cases. At the same time, there is evidence of PE being side-lined by some schools as a "nice to have", rather than a "must do", reducing PE time in order to focus on catch-up in other areas, which is understandable but to the detriment of PE.

It is worth remembering that even before covid, the situation was deteriorating. For example, as part of the research review series, Ofsted published its PE paper only last week, revealing reductions in the time allocated to PE of up to 20% since 2013 at key stage 3, and 38% at key stage 4. If we add increasingly sedentary lifestyles, gaming, phone addiction and sleep deprivation, we see that those are all turning children and young people off physical movement, with dire consequences for their own health and that of the nation. If we are serious about taking on the ever-growing pressures on the NHS, instilling a habit of physical activity for life would be a good way to start alleviating that pressure. The Lords Committee also said in its report that schools are the place where:

"Attitudes towards sport and physical activity...track into adulthood."

The even better news is that we can actually do something about it; that is where physical education comes in. I am not, I hope, naive enough to think that making PE a core subject will, on its own, achieve that laudable objective. As a father of four, I know I have a responsibility to lead by example, and encourage my own children to find ways that they can enjoy keeping fit and active into adult life. Indeed, my 18-year-old son recently announced to me that he wants to join me on my next London marathon—my 17th, I think—this October, so I must be doing something right.

Having had the privilege of being Children's Minister, rarely have I come across a specific policy, with a modest price tag, that has a very real prospect of changing the trajectory of so many young people towards a healthier and more fulfilling life. The evidence is staring us in the face. It is no coincidence that the very best schools, both state and independent, have for many years understood that the holistic intertwining of PE into their school offer reaps rewards in so many different ways—physically, socially, emotionally and academically, too.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My hon. Friend is right to highlight the need to combat and reduce childhood obesity. I congratulate him on securing this worthwhile debate and fully support what he is saying. There is a greater social benefit to children, particularly those from deprived backgrounds who do not have the life advantages of children from affluent backgrounds, in playing sport, coming together, learning team skills and enjoying being part of a team and the social fabric of sport. That is recognised, quite rightly, in much of the state sector—in good-performing state schools—and in the private sector. What he is proposing will ensure that all children have access to the opportunity to benefit from those wider parts of education, and that will bring their lives along further. I do not know if my hon. Friend would like to reflect on that, but I hope that the Minister has taken note of those comments.

Edward Timpson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the benefits that I saw when I was responsible for school sports as Children's Minister was from programmes in the inner cities where children do not always have access to other facilities. The children there were gaining so many of the elements, which other children take for granted, that sport, physical activity and—the precursor to that—good physical education can bring to their lives. It is not only about their

participation in sport; it is about their life skills, confidence and sense of achievement and purpose, and where that can lead. At the end of my speech I will mention an individual who all Members will know and who falls into that category.

That point segues into one made by the celebrated 19th century educator—and headteacher at one of my former schools—Edward Thring. He was ahead of his time in observing that when it comes to physical education,

“The aim was to produce a wholeness and harmony, within and beyond the classroom, in work and in play, and in body, intellect, and soul.”

As an academically rigorous curriculum is not at odds with having PE at its heart, we can see it as the only subject that educates through the physical domain. The evidence that it helps enhance academic performance—not forgetting concentration and behaviour—has never been greater.

In 2015, the University of Texas at Austin published a paper entitled “Active Education: Growing Evidence on Physical Activity and Academic Performance”. The paper reviewed 39 separate studies and unanimously found that,

“Physical activity can have both immediate and long-term benefits on academic performance. Almost immediately after engaging in physical activity, children are better able to concentrate on classroom tasks, which can enhance learning.”

Let us take an example from England. At Sandal Castle VA Community Primary School in Wakefield physical education is at the heart of their curriculum. It is also seen as a vital and critical priority driver for school improvement. They have two members of staff who have the Association for Physical Education and Sports Leaders UK level 5 certificate in primary school physical education specialism, which is vital in raising standards in primary school physical education teaching and learning. The breadth of curriculum opportunity on offer in the extended school day has ensured that attainment in core subjects continues to be well above the national average. In 2019, 82% of children achieved the national standard in reading, writing and maths, compared with the England average of 65%. Progress measures in English in particular are well above the national average, with reading at +3.5 and writing at +3.1—no coincidence, one might think.

At this stage, it is probably sensible to explain exactly what PE is and how it interrelates with physical activity and sport. The structure of the national curriculum is based on 12 subjects, classified as core and foundation subjects. English, mathematics and science are core subjects across all key stages, with PE being the only foundation subject across all those key stages. The purpose of studying PE as outlined in the national curriculum is as follows:

“A high-quality physical education curriculum inspires all pupils to succeed and excel in competitive sport and other physically-demanding activities. It should provide opportunities for pupils to become physically confident in a way which supports their health and fitness.”

The stated aims of the national curriculum for PE are

“to ensure that all pupils: develop competence to excel in a broad range of physical activities; are physically active for sustained periods of time; engage in competitive sports and activities”

and “lead healthy, active lives.”

PE is essentially the planned progressive learning that takes place in the timetabled school curriculum involving both learning to move and moving to learn, the context for that learning being through physical activity. Sport is the structured learning that takes place beyond the curriculum, often within school settings, out of hours or in the community, but there is clearly a symbiotic relationship between all three, with PE being the foundation from which all other physical activity and sport flows. As Ofsted points out, a child with lower levels of motor competence may be less inclined to participate in physical activity and sport. As such, getting PE right is fundamental.

Writing in the *British Medical Journal* on 2 March, Michael Craig Watson and Dr John Lloyd from the Institute of Health Promotion and Education observed:

“In addition to the current low levels of physical activity in the UK there are also stark inequalities in levels of physical activity within the population. There are large disparities in physical activity participation rates in relation to age, disability, ethnic group and gender”

and that

“physical activity should not just be for the elite or for example individuals of a certain age, or ability”

—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter)—

“but should be actively promoted to the whole population.”

Schools have an important part to play in developing health literacy. That includes physical education, which is a central part of the curriculum for all pupils of all ages.

In calling for this debate, I am realistic: PE will not miraculously appear as a core subject overnight. Further work is needed to ensure we have the capacity, culture and commitment within the schools system for it to have the desired effect. Some have also legitimately raised issues about curriculum time, assessment challenges, recruitment, and the quality of PE teaching at primary level. The Government are already addressing the latter, and I humbly suggest that when it comes to recruitment, the Department for Education should use Ofsted’s recent review of PE to help improve accountability and inspection of PE and the use of the premium, as well as develop a coherent standards and assessment framework for PE that would satisfy a core status in the future. That could include how PE reduces the burden on the NHS, as suggested by Professor Jo Harris from Loughborough University.

Turning to the question of curriculum time, PE has the flexibility to be incorporated more in the wider curriculum and woven into the school day if the leadership, innovation and desire is there. For instance, at St Gregory CEVC Primary School in Suffolk, the headteacher, Daniel Woodrow, has introduced a whole-school, 10-minute “wake and shake” activity first thing and, later, a 15-minute daily mile—something I know the Minister is keen on, and these days runs pretty decent times on, too—as well as three PE lessons every week.

Crucially, we should not see the curriculum as sacred and be dogmatic about its constitution; in my view, the move towards better vocational representation at school and college—which is the right move—is testament to that. The curriculum has evolved over time, and should continue to do so in order to best reflect the current and foreseeable demands and needs of society. Quite rightly, we place high value on all children having good knowledge and application of maths, English and science, but

[Edward Timpson]

surely the time has come to recognise the equal value of good knowledge and application of PE as one of the cornerstones of setting up a child with some of the core attributes they will need for life.

Let us build on the excellent practice and leadership already out there. Let us learn from the outstanding schools that have already made PE essential to their delivery of an excellent education. Let us start to build the base of expertise and understanding across our school workforce. Let us set the achievable target of having a great PE teacher in every primary school, and let us make CPD more effective, so that the transition from a foundation to core subject up to key stage 2 can be where we begin. As Nik, who replied to my survey, said, let us assess the quality of the delivery through internal and external engagement and improve the real, “on the ground” evidence from the likes of the United Learning trust, which is piloting PE as a core subject across its whole family of schools. That is what children and the public want, too.

Pupils from the Bishop of Hereford’s Bluecoat School told me that they wanted more time for PE and sports in the curriculum, including different after-school and lunch timings to help find that time. A survey of adults conducted by the Youth Sport Trust found that the majority of the general public wanted more physical activity in schools and would support enhancing physical education to core subject status. Almost two thirds of respondents strongly agreed or tended to agree that PE should be a core subject in the national curriculum, with 80% agreeing that there should be more opportunities for young people of all ages to be physically active at school.

Before I allow others to contribute to the debate, I want to mention swimming and water safety. It is a statutory element of PE that every 11-year-old is required to be able to swim competently, confidently and proficiently over a distance of at least 25 metres. Despite the requirement being in place since 1994, one in three children—around 200,000 every year, leave—primary school not being able to do so. I find that astonishing and worrying. It lends further credence to the need to take swimming even more seriously as an essential life skill. I hope the Minister will use the funding already announced to look at improving access to facilities, including pop-up pools, and better scrutinising this aspect of PE, so that we can ensure that all children get what they are entitled to.

I am aware from the Government’s response to the Lords’ report that there are no immediate plans to re-categorise PE as a core subject. However, I do not think it is giving away any state secrets to say that over the last few weeks I have had both enthusiastic and encouraging conversations with other ministerial colleagues in a position to make things happen. There will be people who want to put it off—either because it is not a priority, because it is too difficult to do or because they simply are not interested. As I said earlier, there are very few straightforward policy changes that sit on a Whitehall desk carrying such a clear need, evidential basis, public support and potentially far-reaching impact as this one.

I earlier alluded to Jason Robinson OBE, the former England rugby union World cup winner and British Lion. He said:

“Physical education was a vital part of my life growing up and gave me so much, playing an instrumental role in the success I went on to achieve in my career. PE has a unique power to inspire,

but too often it isn’t taken seriously enough. The time for change has come and for PE to become a core subject in every school, rightly put alongside other key subjects to ensure that the next generation of our young people are given better opportunities.”

If the Government were able to accept, at least in principle, the recommendations of the Association for Physical Education’s taskforce, the Lords Select Committee and others focused on PE becoming a core subject, it is no exaggeration to say that we would be taking the lead with an absolute commitment to the development of healthy bodies and minds for all children, whatever their background. If we have the will—or should I say Will—we can make it happen. PE should be at the heart of school life.

4.49 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) for securing this debate. It is not often I get really excited in this place, but today is one of those days. This is a subject close to my heart.

I have a background in sport and physical activity and health and wellbeing, having lectured in these subjects for over a decade and worked both in primary schools, delivering exercise sessions to young children, including the aforementioned “wake up, shake up” activity, and in a secondary school PE department. Based on that experience, I strongly believe that PE should have a much more central role in the curriculum.

Successive Governments have missed the chance to improve the nation’s health and wellbeing by adopting a holistic and preventive approach, placing an emphasis on educating young people about the importance of physical activity, what it means to have a healthy lifestyle, and ensuring that they adopt healthy, enjoyable exercise habits from an early age. With alarming figures relating to childhood obesity, diabetes and a range of other health conditions, along with serious concerns around children’s mental health, we must take a more preventive and long-term approach to health and wellbeing. The provision of high-quality PE in our schools should be a fundamental part of that.

Do not misunderstand me: the provision of good-quality PE is not the only solution to those problems. As the hon. Member for Eddisbury said, we also have to look at a wide range of other things, such as active travel, active families and active communities, grassroots sports provision, nutrition, and addressing the barriers to being more active—be they real or perceived. However, young people’s access to good-quality and wide-ranging physical education is an important part of addressing some of those serious health issues. That is why I think that PE should be a core subject.

I accept that that cannot happen overnight, and we do, of course, have to consider the implications for the broader curriculum. However, as the Association for Physical Education says, we should give PE a higher priority straightaway, with children spending more time on physical activity, and aim to have a highly trained PE teacher in every primary school within a few years.

As *The Times Educational Supplement* reported recently, by having high-quality, properly resourced and immovable PE provision in our schools, we encourage children and young people to adopt lifelong physical activity habits, which will reduce the prevalence of a range of chronic health conditions and, in turn, take some of the pressure off the NHS, which we know is bursting at the seams.

The “A national plan for sport, health and wellbeing” report, recently discussed in the House of Lords, noted:

“Attitudes towards physical activity...track into adulthood.”

In short, by exposing children to a wide variety of PE options and enabling them to develop healthy habits from a young age, we help to create a generation of healthy adults. The benefits of high-quality PE provision do not stop at the physical. The skills that children learn from PE are many: perseverance, resilience, collaboration, teamwork, initiative, and confidence, to name just a few. Those skills help young people to flourish in education and life.

The great thing about physical activity is that there is something for everyone, whether that is in competitive sport, dance, gym, group exercise, running, and everything in between. There is something for everyone—boys, girls, men and women. On that note, I am pleased to be providing a female perspective to today’s debate. I had two very good female PE teachers, who were instrumental in inspiring me to adopt physical activity habits for the rest of my life—including a 30-year hockey career which, sadly, came to an end as a result of the pressures of this job. Those role models are important, and that is why PE should be a core curriculum subject at the heart of our education system.

As well as having PE on the curriculum, it is also important to look at how we can embed physical activity into the education system as a whole. The “creating active schools” framework, designed in part by the Yorkshire Sport Foundation, is a good example of that. It encourages all stakeholders, from local authorities to school leaders and pupils, to play a role in embedding physical activity in the school’s ethos.

I am pleased to take part in today’s important debate, and to have the opportunity to speak about a subject so close to my heart. I offer to work with colleagues across the House on taking this agenda forward.

4.53 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, yet again, in Westminster Hall, Mr Hosie. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) for securing this important debate. I thought his speech, and that of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), was fantastic in outlining the absolute reasons why physical education needs to be taken much more seriously, particularly in primary school curriculums.

Mr Hosie, the irony is not lost on me; I am quite aware of the overly large circumference of my waist at this moment in time, and that for me to be talking about physical health, I should be leading by example. However, PE is absolutely essential to tackling issues such as childhood obesity, which are, sadly, all too prevalent in the great city of Stoke-on-Trent, and in Kidsgrove and Talke, which I am also proud to represent. There are a number of different factors for that obesity, but one definite challenge is that, all too often, in the advancement of students’ literacy and numeracy—which are absolutely critical in improving the life outcomes of pupils in my area—the physical education side has suffered.

I am the first in my family to be the beneficiary of a private school education, something I am very proud of. My parents worked very hard and made many sacrifices

to give me the head start in life that they felt they had not had through their education. People always ask me, “What is the major difference between a pupil from a state school and a private school?” I was a teacher in a state school for eight and a half years before I entered this place. The answer is simple. Even though private schools produce fantastic academic results, they heavily invest time, the money from parents—yes, I understand that is an advantage—and energy into giving children a rounded education, not just through debating, LAMDA and drama, but through physical education.

I remember that Wednesdays from 1 o’clock meant games for the entire year group. A variety of football, hockey, rugby, netball and many other sports would be available to us for two to three hours. That meant we were getting high-quality physical education from fantastic teachers, such as Mr McCollin, whom I still dread and fear to this day. When I went back to see him 12 months ago, I still looked down and called him sir, because of the fear he brought when it came to being disciplined. Perhaps Mr Speaker should have a word with him, to get me to behave in the Chamber.

Ultimately, it was teachers such as him who inspired me to play rugby, a sport I had never played before I was 11. I was delighted to end up with a very successful career, even being paid to play rugby union while I was at university. It is about that type of support network. As the hon. Member for Batley and Spen said, it is about teamwork, the learning and camaraderie with colleagues, the resilience from taking a knock and getting back up, and accepting defeat, even when it feels undeserved. Those are the things that are inspiring, and why we need to do a much better job, ensuring that children in state schools are getting access to that.

Stoke-on-Trent in 2019-20 featured among the top local authorities for high levels of childhood obesity; 27.7% of children were either overweight or obese. In Kidsgrove and Talke, 27% of children in year 6 were obese and 19% overweight. Those are scary statistics that have a huge impact. As someone who has been open recently about my mental health struggles, I understand the impact a poor diet and lack of exercise can have on mental health. It is no shock to me that high levels of obesity are leading to long waiting lists with child and adolescent mental health services. Adults in the city of Stoke-on-Trent have issues with asthma, and heart conditions, with a clear link to the lack of physical activity at the earliest stages. We talk about the first 1,001 days of a child’s life being the most critical for imparting knowledge and nurturing their growth, but there is a physical aspect as well.

Kidsgrove sports centre was closed in 2017. Thanks to the Government’s town deal funding and Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, it has been refurbished and will reopen in July 2022, bringing swimming back to the town, with its record high levels of obesity and overweight children. There will be a gym, which will be run by the Kidsgrove sports centre community group, so that every pound that is spent in it stays in that community centre, for the benefit of that local community.

Alongside that, we have invested in a pump track at Newchapel rec, which has kids on their BMXs, scooters, roller blades and a variety of other wheely machinery. It is getting them out and about. When I drive past, I see the benefit of that with tens, if not hundreds, of children on a daily basis enjoying that facility. For the mere sum

[Jonathan Gullis]

of £100,000, that town deal has already delivered over and above what was invested in that area. Clough Hall bowls club is nearby and there is a FIFA-standard 3G astroturf pitch at the King's Church of England School, supplied through the town deal funding. That will not only be used by kids during the day. We opened it up by doing a deal with the school, so that the community can use it in the evening and at weekends. This is a sports village complex that we are trying to bring to the local area, so that there is no excuse why anyone cannot access good, high-quality physical education.

The last thing I want to say is that we have some great people in our city doing fantastic work. We have companies such as Bee Active, which was established in 2013 by brothers Ben and Bobby Mills. It offers an innovative approach to physical education, Ofsted-registered schools and holiday sports clubs. It has extended services beyond children's PE, to include gentle exercise for older people, birthday parties, celebrations, special events and community sessions, to name a few.

Bee Active even has a great app that parents can use to do activities with their kids at home, record them and have them marked and assessed on how well they are doing. The company came to the office, and let me just say there is a lot of work to do on my part—I am sure my daughter and son will be much better. Bee Active has become Staffordshire and Cheshire's leading provider of sports and physical activity, supporting 75 primary and secondary schools to deliver PE. However, there is one challenge in its way: the PE and sport premium. Because the money is not secured for the long term and there is almost an annual bidding process, there is insecurity as to whether the fund will even exist and, therefore, whether the business can carry on. Ben from Bee Active wants me to ask whether we can have a long-term settlement for the fund to ensure that companies such as his can continue to operate.

Edward Timpson: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend's last comment about the premium, which I was privileged to help set up in my time at the Department for Education. I am delighted that it is still going, but long-term funding makes a significant difference to schools' ability to bed in some of the practical improvements that they need in the way that they teach PE. Do we not also need confirmation from the Government in relation to school games organisers by 7 April, so that they can continue their excellent work on interschool and intraschool competitions, which have been so successful over the last 10 years?

Jonathan Gullis: I could not agree more. This is so important. Again, the benefit of private schools is that they have interschool cups, so we should have interschool competitions. The highlight of my week was knowing that I could get out of maths halfway through the lesson in order to go and play against another local school in a rugby match, or against another house when we were doing our school cup games. It is so important for breeding confidence and motivation in young people within our education sphere, so long-term funding needs to be approved. We cannot have year-on-year uncertainty with primary schools and the providers that are doing such great work externally.

My final point is that we need an extended school day. I bang on and on about this, and I know I will embarrass the Parliamentary Private Secretary for the Department for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston), who is sat behind the Minister. He was an advocate for physical education when he was on the Education Committee, and they sucked him into the Department—probably to shut him up. Now that he is in the Department, he can tell it loud and clear that we need an extended school day. Not only does it keep kids off the streets and make the most vulnerable kids feel safe in their school building because it is a place that they know, surrounded by adults whom they trust. It also means that, regardless of whether there needs to be catch-up, the whole school can enjoy good-quality physical education if there is a challenge with fitting it within normal curriculum time.

The extended school day is happening already in the private school sector, and it is unfair that it is not happening in the state school sector. It is unfair on parents, who are having to leave work two or three hours earlier than they should, and who are having lower incomes than they deserve, in order to go and pick up their loved ones or look after them. The stats do not lie: all too often in major cities, knife crime involving young people peaks at the end of the school day, between 3 pm and 5 pm, as I have seen in some studies. We need to grab hold of the situation and announce this fantastic thing. I know it costs money, and I am fully aware that those in Treasury will be rolling their eyes at me yet again because I am asking for more funds, but in the long term we will see money come back in because we have confident and healthy young people who do not need to access health services in the way that they are doing now, and who feel much more confident and have aspiration to go and achieve.

5.3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) for securing the debate. I am pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), in his place, and I look forward to the Minister's response. The Minister has shown that he can do this, because I remember when he was slightly broader than he is now. It is lovely to see him in his place. My contribution will reflect the Northern Ireland perspective, as it always does.

It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis). I think we have now found his weakness. We know that Mr Speaker threatened to ring his mother, but we now know the right person to call, so perhaps I will text Mr Speaker to say, "The person you want is his teacher." Beware of what might happen in the Chamber.

I declare an interest as a type 2 diabetic. I did not set out to be a type 2 diabetic, but I had Chinese carry-outs four or five times a week with two bottles of Coca-Cola, which is never a good recipe for keeping thin and trim. I realised only a year after my diagnosis that I had probably been a diabetic for a long time. I make that point because it is about having the right start.

I go back further than most people in this Chamber, as I was at school in the 1960s and early 1970s. I think about the grave impact of my type 2 diabetes and the

benefits of PE. I went to a sporty school, and I was thin and wiry. I was always a good runner, and I loved rugby and cricket. Sport was an integral part of where we were.

However, I was always aware of something else at school, and I am speaking personally now. There is always a child—I was at an all-boys school, so it was a boy—who is always picked last when a team is picked. He came in last and was the last out of the changing room. That is how I learned to observe and consider how we encourage children. The fact is that boy always turned up for PE, but he did not seem to get enthused about it.

I learned to swim at school, and I am glad I did. I have always been a fairly strong swimmer, but I understand why some children ask their parents to write a note to get them out of what they perceive to be a humiliation. Yet the importance of a healthy lifestyle must be established from a young age.

Times have changed in the world of PE. In my day, we used a sports hall. Star jumps and the dreaded rope were deployed, and I am probably ageing myself here. Now, my speechwriter Naomi—she is a very busy speechwriter—tells me that her six-year-old came home saying that she was doing a month of Monday football, as an additional day of PE. There were no complaints about that extra PE.

I am not sure how schools enthuse children, and I will give another example shortly, but they certainly do back home. It seems to be working, which is the important thing, because that wee girl is not bothered one bit about doing extra PE. In fact, she is absolutely bouncing about it—literally bouncing. What a tremendous way to encourage young boys and girls to be involved in exercise that is interesting and exciting.

My eldest granddaughter, who is 12 coming up 13, was never very sporty; she was more into her laptop and contacting her friends. This year, everything changed. She attends Strangford Integrated College in Carrowdore, and she is on the girls football team. She has lost weight, which is tremendous to see. I was quite surprised, but she is enthused by the sport, including the training.

Sport is another way for children to engage with their friends, as the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) said. The strategy of my granddaughter's football team seems to be all or nothing. Her team lost their first match 7-0, but they won their second game 6-0. They go all out to score goals or all out to prevent them.

We must make sure there is exciting, inclusive exercise in school to tackle the sedentary lure of the computer and tablet. Get children away from those things and give them a physical focus. The days have changed from when mums and dads threw their children out to play in the streets until the streetlights came on, as happened to me. Parents are now understandably concerned about not knowing where their child is, so things are slightly different today.

Additionally, most parents who work all day are unable to take their children to the park to play, as they have to make dinner, do the housework and help the children to do their homework. The natural thing is that kids stay safe inside, playing their games. However, if we can engage children through the schools or local

sports clubs, we can make them be energetic and keen—as they are naturally—and then I believe that we can move in the right direction.

Although children playing indoors is completely understandable, it is not ideal. Thankfully, the schools are stepping up and putting on additional physical activity. Primary schools are doing it, too, for very young children, which I am glad to see. The children in my constituency now start their day with what is called the daily mile, which the hon. Member for Eddisbury mentioned. It is incredible, because all the kids want to do the daily mile. They walk with their friends from school—they can chat the whole way round—but they do their daily mile and it has almost become an everyday occurrence. They walk at a pace set by the teacher, who sets a pace the children are able to cope with. This enjoyable form of exercise teaches our children that we can make exercise a part of daily life.

The staff in the Chamber and the security guards sometimes ask me, “Are you doing any running over the weekend?” I say, “No, there are three stages: running, walking and dandering.” I am a danderer. I take strolls at my leisure, as I am well past the other stages.

Time is of the essence, so I conclude by saying that obesity is an increasingly common problem in Northern Ireland, as it is across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. One in every five children aged two to five is classified as obese, so we have a real problem but we have a way of addressing it, as the hon. Member for Eddisbury and others have said. We have to change the story. The sugar tax on smaller chocolate bars is a good step, but exercise is how we want to achieve this. Schools have a vital role to play by providing more PE with interesting exercises. Hobbies would also be a wonderful step for each region in the UK to prioritise.

I am pleased to support the hon. Member for Eddisbury and I look forward to hearing from the shadow Minister and, more importantly, the Minister.

5.11 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) for securing an important debate on an issue that I believe is vital to the future of young people and our country.

It is clear from today's contributions that Members on both sides of the House agree that physical education and sport are an important part of the curriculum, and this has been a good-spirited debate. The hon. Member for Eddisbury spoke passionately about the importance of physical education, and I thank him for his efforts and his leadership in the task group. He described how some people perceive PE to be a “nice to have” rather than an integral part of the curriculum, and he spoke about the impact of PE on health and wellbeing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) showed her usual passion and energy, which she demonstrates on every issue she raises in Parliament. She has huge experience of the education sector, and she talked about PE needing greater priority and about the skills it gives young people so that they can succeed, flourish and make friends.

[Stephen Morgan]

We know the pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to children's academic learning, but it is also important to recognise the impact of the lack of opportunities pupils have had to participate in organised team sports and physical education. I am sure colleagues on both sides of the House will share my concerns about the combined impact that the limited opportunities for sport and exercise and being locked indoors for the past two years has had on our young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Sport England's survey, published in December, showed that only 45% of children and young people—equivalent to 3.2 million pupils—achieved the chief medical officer's guideline of taking part in sport and physical activity for an average of 60 minutes or more a day. Worse still, 32% averaged less than 30 minutes a day. Crucially, the guideline is similar to the ambition of the Government's 2019 school sport and activity plan

“that all children should have access to 60 minutes of physical activity every day”.

The Government had stated that they would publish an update on their plan this year but, despite their targets, it is still nowhere to be seen.

Even with the Government's record over the last two years, the state of children accessing exercise prior to the pandemic cannot be forgotten and simply swept under the carpet. According to a Taking Part survey covering the period of April 2019 to March 2020, just 65% of five to 15-year-olds had participated in competitive sport in school during the previous 12 months, and only 58% of five to 10-year-olds had played sport at school in organised competitions. Will the Minister commit his Department to publishing an update on its school sport and activity plan? What specific action will he be taking to address the Government's failure to meet their own objective of all children having access to 60 minutes of physical activity every day?

The pandemic has caused widespread disruption to children's learning, including PE and sport, but the Government cannot use covid as a smokescreen to shroud a decade of failure to provide proper access to physical education and sport that students need and deserve. If Ministers will not deliver for our children, the next Labour Government will.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) for securing a debate on this very important subject. I am aware that it is close to his heart and I am grateful to him for his efforts thus far, including, of course, as chair of the Association for Physical Education taskforce, to promote the importance of this curriculum subject. In addition, this is the first opportunity that I have had at the—metaphorical—Dispatch Box to thank him for all his work as one of my predecessors as the Minister responsible for children and families.

I also thank all hon. Members for their constructive and passionate contributions to this important debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury mentioned, we run together most Tuesday mornings and we have

therefore had the benefit of discussing at great length this and many other issues. He knows that I am a relatively new convert to running—in truth, I am a relatively new convert to exercise full stop. But both running and exercise have now become a passion. In truth, I was not keen on playing sport at school. I did not enjoy it. People did not encourage me to play sport in school. I was one of the children picked last, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned in his speech. I was not very good at sport, and the main reason was that I lacked confidence. However, PE, sport and physical activity have significant importance in keeping children healthy and for the positive impact that they can have on a child's health and wellbeing. I mention my own personal experience because, importantly, sport builds confidence. Schools should be aware of the difference that high-quality PE can make to a school. That is why PE is right at the heart of the national curriculum. In fact, it is the only foundation subject that is compulsory across all four key stages of the national curriculum.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury shares my passion in this area and a desire for us to go further and faster. Why? Yes, because health, fitness and physical wellbeing and mental health and wellbeing are really important, but also because this is about confidence, as I said, about camaraderie and teamwork, as the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) pointed out, and about leadership skills. They all come with taking part in competitive sport.

Why now? As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) said, we have an obesity crisis. We know that there is a growing issue—pardon the pun—with childhood obesity. Obesity is now a bigger cause of cancer than smoking and although sport is not the only solution to obesity, it is a part of it. PE, sport and physical activity can and should play their part in tackling that. Equally important, of course, are diet and nutrition, but setting behaviour and habits around physical activity early in life and, importantly, as part of family life is vital. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury talked about what we see our parents doing, and about doing things with our parents. That is vital, because children take that with them into adult life. These habits and behaviours stay with people, and then they are seen by their children, so they develop them too and they are seen as normal. High-quality PE at the earliest age at school is key to allowing children to learn and develop key skills that will—to come back to this point—give them the confidence to take part in physical activity and competitive sport. My hon. Friend mentioned this, too. I genuinely believe, and there is evidence to suggest, that it also enhances academic performance.

I could say, “Everything is rosy. This happens for all children and they get excellent PE teaching at primary school.” But the truth is that that is not the case. I know that from my own experience and from the experience of many young people I have spoken with. The teaching of PE is done very well in many schools up and down the country, but it is inconsistent and, particularly at primary level, there is an issue with teachers lacking the confidence to teach PE effectively. Too often, it is outsourced, as we know. As great as rugby and football coaching is in and of itself, that is not PE; it does not

give children the confidence and life skills that will lead them to take part in competitive sport. I am determined to address that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury has called for PE to be made a core subject. He rightly pointed out that no curriculum review is under way, but I am very sympathetic to the case and the arguments that he makes and I will raise them at length with the schools Minister.

At the heart of the debate, notwithstanding the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury, is the challenge to ensure that PE as a subject is taken seriously by all schools and that it is done brilliantly and consistently across our country. That is vital so that all children have the chance to develop the fundamental physical literacy that they need to go on to live an active, healthy life and to experience different types of sport, so that they are enthused and have confidence. That is why I am clear on the importance of PE as a curriculum subject. As I say, it is the only foundation subject taught across all key stages, making it a requirement for children of all ages. I assure all hon. Members across the House that the Government place significant importance on the delivery of PE lessons.

Notwithstanding that, given the challenges facing schools, as alluded to by the spokesperson for the official Opposition, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), and with the recovery from covid under way, we remain wary of making technical changes to the curriculum now. That could place additional burdens on teacher workloads and training requirements by introducing changes, which is particularly relevant as schools start to recover from the pandemic.

That said, however, as referenced in the taskforce report of my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury, PE and sport are also vital to recovery. We want to focus on what we can do to build on what is already in place to ensure that PE is taught really well in schools. I therefore confirm that we remain committed to our manifesto commitments to support the effective use of school sport facilities and to invest in primary school PE teaching and the promotion of physical literacy and competitive sports.

My hon. Friend rightly pointed out the £30 million a year for opening up school sports facilities in England, as well as our measures to promote and improve the quality of teaching of physical education in primary schools. We will build on that £10.1 million that has supported schools to reopen their sports facilities after the pandemic, increasing opportunities for children and young people across England to take part in sport.

What have we done to improve PE so far? To help primary schools make improvements to the quality of PE and the support that they offer, we introduced the primary PE and sport premium in 2013, during the tenure of my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury. The funding for the premium since its introduction is £1.6 billion, with the funding having doubled to £320 million a year since 2017. We are considering arrangements for the primary PE and sport premium for the 2022-23 academic year, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North.

I desperately want to give that long-term certainty of funding. All I can say is that I am working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to enable us

to do that as soon as possible. We are considering a series of approaches to bring together the evidence of what constitutes really good PE, how that can be delivered practically and how to support schools to identify and take the steps necessary to make their provision as good as it can be.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury referred to the school sport and activity action plan. We remain committed to the ambitions that we set out in the plan and we will publish an update to it later this year, to align with our publication of the new sports strategy. That action plan update will not only cover ground lost during the covid-19 restrictions but boost momentum to deliver an action plan for all pupils, regardless of their background.

Notwithstanding what I have said, which I appreciate is lukewarm and complex, I assure my hon. Friend that I am ambitious about what we can do in this space and about going further on PE, school sport and physical activity in schools. I am ambitious about expanding the holiday activities and food programme, to which we have committed £200 million per year for a further three years as part of the spending review. Some 600,000 children up and down our country have taken part in those activities over the past year.

I am exploring whether we could be a daily mile nation, and I warn hon. Members that that will be not just for schools, but for everyone. I think we can do that, and I am pushing in the right direction. I am exploring a summer activity challenge—similar to the summer reading challenge—so that we get kids moving and taking part in sports and activities over the summer holidays.

The ambition is there and the work is ongoing. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury and Members throughout the Chamber are assured that we are determined to achieve the same thing, which is every school teaching PE well and every pupil benefiting from that, wherever they are, up and down our country. We will work with Ofsted, schools, sporting bodies and PE teachers on the further steps that we will take to achieve exactly that.

5.24 pm

Edward Timpson: I thank all hon. Members who contributed to this afternoon's debate. Although I cannot speak for the Labour party, a one-line Whip has been circulating for an hour or two, which may explain why some very enthusiastic Members who would otherwise have been here have found some more pressing engagement. However, if nothing else, the quality of the debate has been extremely high, and has ensured that we have brought to the fore the key aspects of what makes PE such a crucial part of school life.

My hon. Friend the Minister underplayed his hand a little by saying he was lukewarm in his response when he was actually very enthusiastic. He has given me a lot of hope for what is to come, both in schools and in the communities that surround them. I say to him—and to Her Majesty's Government in their entirety, because I appreciate that other Departments are involved in some of these decisions—that moving PE to core status is not just a technical change, but would change the whole way in which it is seen in the schools system. It will no longer be able to be an afterthought as every school will

[Edward Timpson]

have to engage and think hard about how to deliver the high-quality physical education we want to see right across the board.

I am pleased that the Minister shares my ambition to go further and faster and is sympathetic to the arguments we have made today on making PE a core subject. I acknowledge—as I did in my speech—that there is still some work to do in order to satisfy not just ourselves but everyone who needs to be party to that decision that all the building blocks are in place so it becomes a plausible, effective and long-term change that we can rely on within schools. To that end, I would be pleased if I could continue to work with the Minister and his Department on how we build capacity within the system and develop some of the assessment and accountability measures that will be necessary to satisfy everybody with a vested interest that the children we are putting through our school system are reaping all the benefits that that education can provide. We know that this is already happening in the very best schools—it has been happening for a long time—and I still come across some very inspiring leadership within physical education, but

it is not happening everywhere often enough. Off the back of covid, we have a real opportunity to shine a light on a part of the schools system that has been kept in the dark for too long.

PE has a huge part to play in moving our country forward, both in ensuring a happy, long and healthy life for more of our citizens and making sure that our education system is performing at the highest possible level. Ultimately, it is not just about making sure children come out healthy at the end of their schooling, important though that is; we want to make sure they reach their potential, emotionally, mentally and academically. PE can tick all those boxes, and whenever in their life a person discovers the benefits of exercise, they never turn back. Let us make sure that more children find that out much earlier.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered physical education as a core subject in schools.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 23 March 2022

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Trade Policy Update

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): Since launching the negotiations on 19 January 2022, there have been 13 sessions between teams and five negotiations between the Trade Secretary and her opposite number. Yesterday, in Washington, the Trade Secretary met the US Commerce Secretary to discuss the resolution of US tariffs on UK steel and aluminium.

These US tariffs, imposed in 2018, restricted imports of certain steel and aluminium into the US, with additional duties of 25% and 10% respectively.

After two months of intense negotiations, we agreed a bespoke solution with the US which reflects the needs of our steel and aluminium industries.

This Government welcome the US decision to replace their Section 232 tariffs on imports of certain UK steel and aluminium products with “tariff-rate quotas” (TRQs), effective as of 1 June 2022. This solution reopens tariff free access to the US market back to levels before section 232 tariffs up to a specified volume.

The key elements of the solution are as follows:

On steel, the US will provide duty free access per annum for 500 thousand metric tonnes across 54 product categories within a TRQ. This provides certainty for UK industry, in terms of being able to maintain current export levels in the face of global competition, but also provides scope for growth in our exports to the US.

On aluminium the US will provide duty free access per annum for 21.6 thousand metric tonnes within a TRQ.

As part of the solution, we have also agreed to a future bilateral dialogue with the US on how best to tackle the critical issues of global excess capacity and the carbon intensity of our steel and aluminium industries. This will form a strong foundation for our engagement with the US going forward to ensure our domestic industry continues to be protected.

The removal of tariffs provides welcome relief to our steel and aluminium sectors, which support the jobs of around 80,000 people across the UK supply chain.

Both the UK and the US will need time to implement the solution. The TRQs will be implemented from 1 June 2022. The UK’s rebalancing measures will be suspended from this same date.

Reaching a solution on Section 232 clears the way for us to focus on strengthening the overall UK-US trading relationship, as we have demonstrated with the launch of the UK-US Joint Dialogues on the Future of Atlantic Trade, the first of which took place in Baltimore on 21 and 22 March. These dialogues demonstrate that we are closely aligned with the US on championing and advancing trade policy which helps build a fairer, freer, greener global economy and trading relationship. They will encourage closer collaboration on shared values such as our respective Levelling Up and ‘Build Back Better’ agendas, as well as explore ways to drive more

modern, innovative approaches to international trade with our biggest trading partner in areas such as digital, green trade and supporting SMEs.

The dialogues will continue in the UK later this spring.

[HCWS710]

NORTHERN IRELAND

New Decade, New Approach

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Conor Burns): During the passage of the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act, the Government committed to laying a written ministerial statement every six months setting out which of our commitments in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) we have delivered on to date. This is the first of those statements.

The NDNA agreement facilitated the restoration of the devolved institutions in January 2020 after three years of hiatus. The Government will continue to implement our commitments under NDNA to support a stronger, more prosperous and inclusive Northern Ireland in which everyone can participate and thrive.

So far, the Government have:

published four reports on the use of the Petition of Concern mechanism, with the most recent report published on 20 January 2022;

passed the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act to implement the institutional reforms agreed in NDNA;

passed the Internal Market Act 2020;

held a meeting of the Board of Trade in Northern Ireland;

ensured that Northern Ireland can access the trade deals the UK is striking across the world;

invited representatives of the Northern Ireland Executive to all meetings of the UK-EU Joint and Specialised Committees discussing Northern Ireland specific matters which were also attended by the Irish Government as part of the European Union’s delegation;

changed the rules governing how the people of Northern Ireland bring their family members to the UK, enabling them to apply for immigration status on broadly the same terms as family members of Irish citizens;

appointed Danny Kinahan as the first Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner in September 2020;

passed the Armed Forces Act, which further enshrines the Armed Forces Covenant in law;

continued a thorough review of the Aftercare Service, which supports veterans of the Ulster Defence Regiment and Royal Irish Regiment and their dependants;

marked Northern Ireland’s Centenary with a programme of cultural and historical events in 2021;

brought forward regulations that continue to ensure designated Union Flag flying days remain in line with those observed in the rest of the UK;

announced £2 million in funding for Northern Ireland Screen’s Irish Language and Ulster Scots Broadcast Funds;

continued preparations to recognise Ulster Scots as a National Minority under the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities;

announced £4 million in funding for the International Fund for Ireland;

allocated over £700 million of the £2 billion funding in NDNA, which has helped bring an end to the nurses' pay dispute, contributed to the creation of a new Northern Ireland graduate entry medical school in Londonderry, and been used to support the transformation of public services;

provided £50 million to support low-carbon transport in Northern Ireland, enabling the Infrastructure Minister to announce a new fleet of 145 low-carbon buses for Belfast and the north-west;

secured additional funding for the Executive in the 2020-21 year;

reviewed the findings of the renewable heat incentive inquiry report to consider its implications for the use of public money in Northern Ireland; and

continued to foster closer ties and better collaborative working across sectors such as tourism, sport and culture, including through the potential joint UK and Ireland bid to host the 2028 European Championships.

The Government's priority continues to be a return to a fully functioning and stable devolved Government as soon as possible, to build on this progress and ensure the necessary delivery of public services for the people of Northern Ireland.

[HCWS709]

Petition

Wednesday 23 March 2022

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

236 bus between Glossop and Ashton

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that, as a result of the loss of the 236 bus, Glossop has no connection and no direct bus route to Tameside Hospital and Ashton College.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to note this loss and, in light of the recent outcome of the Judicial Review into bus franchising in Greater Manchester, urge Derbyshire County Council and Transport for Greater Manchester to work together to restore the 236 bus service.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Robert Langan, *Official Report*, Tuesday 15 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 862.]

[P002718]

Observation from Baroness Vere of Norbiton (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Transport):

Our National Bus Strategy asked that all English Local Transport Authorities outside London publish Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs) by 31 October 2021, setting out local visions for the step change in bus services that is needed, driven by what passengers and would-be passengers want.

We have been clear that Enhanced Partnerships or franchising arrangements must deliver more comprehensive services, including those which are socially or economically necessary, to drive forward the Government's levelling-up agenda. We recognise that increased bus usage will strengthen communities, sustain town centres and connect those who are isolated. Decisions for subsidised bus services are a matter for individual English local authorities, in light of their other spending priorities, and the 236 bus service is therefore a matter for Derbyshire County Council and Transport for Greater Manchester. We believe these decisions are best taken locally.

At the Budget we announced £1.2 billion of new dedicated funding for BSIPs, part of £3 billion of new spend on buses over this Parliament.

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 23 March 2022

WORK AND PENSIONS

In-work Poverty

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on In-work Poverty on 16 March 2022.

David Rutley: 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.

[Official Report, 16 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 362WH.]

Letter of correction from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley):

An error has been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct information should have been:

David Rutley: 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 **and next** 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.

ORAL ANSWERS

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PETITION

Wednesday 23 March 2022

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Wednesday 23 March 2022

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In-work Poverty	1MC

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**not later than
Wednesday 30 March 2022**

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