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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 29 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

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Energy Price Increase in April 2022

2. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support households affected by the increase in energy prices in April 2022. [906337]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): As the hon. Gentleman knows, the energy price cap continues to protect consumers in a world where gas prices have more than quintupled in a year, and I strongly expect that it will continue to do so.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Given the pressure that families are facing in this cost of living crisis, does he agree that the best way to help families to pay their bills is through a windfall tax on oil and gas producers in the North sea to give the poorest up to £600 off their bills?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we believe that a windfall tax in this situation would be a tax on jobs, destroy investment and add to the uncertainty in oil markets. It would send completely the wrong message to investors, as well as to people who are invested in markets. Every one of us, anyone with a pension, would be adversely affected by such a tax.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): My right hon. Friend is keen to ensure that householders and landlords improve the energy performance of properties. Will he consider the effectiveness of the current energy performance certificate system and whether that genuinely reflects the energy performance of a property? In addition, will he recognise the additional costs incurred in calling for improvements in off-grid properties, where people do not have the opportunity to invest in the same technologies as those in on-grid properties?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that question. As he knows, the current EPC system is not perfect, but it does capture the significant improvement that has happened over the past few years. I am happy to consider people off grid and the challenges that they face from oil prices, and I would be happy to speak to him about that.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): In recent years, the UK Government have printed and borrowed hundreds of billions of pounds, which have been gathered—I emphasise the word “gathered”—not earned by billionaires and the already wealthy. As a result, we have a cost of living crisis that makes energy price rises an acute crisis. Kerosene central heating oil has seen some of the biggest price differences, which especially hits rural and island areas where there is no mains gas. Do the Government have any plan to give people in such places a hand, which would cost a damn sight less than the bailout money that the billionaires have raked in from the Treasury?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As the hon. Gentleman knows, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an extensive package of support only a few weeks ago worth £9.1 billion—that included a £150 council tax rebate for bands A to D and £144 million in discretionary funding for local authorities—which affects everybody in this country. I am also very happy to engage with him on the specific issue of oil prices.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I have been contacted by many pensioners across Hyndburn and Haslingden who are concerned about the cost of their energy bills. Will the Secretary of State set out what measures are in place to support my residents, and will he continue to work with other Departments to keep those measures under review?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I said, the Chancellor announced a £9.1 billion package of support only a few weeks ago. That included the £150 council tax rebate for bands A to D and £144 million in discretionary funding added for local authorities—spending to help the most vulnerable. We announced a £500 million extension of the household support fund last week, but I would be happy to engage with my hon. Friend on what more we can do in the next few months to assuage the burden.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Dr Alan Whitehead.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Well, we know what measures the Government have in place to assist customers to manage the sky-high energy price increases now due in April, and frankly pretty miserable they are. They will not remotely cover the bulk of the increases, and we still do not know how some of them are to be delivered—the “lend you your own money” scheme, for example, as it relates to the 7 million customers on prepaid meters.

I am concerned about how the Government will respond to what we now know will be an equally steep additional price rise in October under the price cap, with authoritative sources calculating that we are likely to see the average energy bill rise by a further £700 to £2,900 or £3,000. What serious additional measures is the Secretary of State planning to help customers to face that further enormous rise? Might he after all be interested in a windfall tax against those companies that continue to profit enormously from escalating gas prices, which could fund substantial assistance to cope with the next price hike?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am very happy to answer the hon. Gentleman's questions. He will know that the next price cap period will be set in August. Even he, with his gifts of prophecy, does not know what the price cap level will be in August. As the Chancellor of the Exchequer has said, we are continually reviewing actual spot markets and what is happening in the market.

The hon. Gentleman will know that nothing could be more damaging to the sector, to people employed in the sector and to the hundreds of thousands of jobs and families dependent on the sector than an arbitrary windfall tax, which would also impoverish many of the people exposed to those companies through their pensions. It is a regressive, retro measure that completely does not understand what business is all about.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Aside from saying that he drives an ageing VW Golf, the Secretary of State is using every excuse possible to try to defend the indefensible. In just a matter of days, the energy price cap will increase by some 700 quid; in just a matter of months, it is anticipated that it will increase by a further £1,000. The Government's response is 150 quid off council tax and £200 that they say is not a loan, but that is indeed a loan. Energy bills are anticipated to increase 14 times faster than wage increases. How on earth are people supposed to get by?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I have said, we have a £9.1 billion support package, which was announced only four weeks ago. On top of that, we allocated £500 million of additional relief only last week to help people through this difficult time. One way in which I am afraid bills would go up is if we adopted the insane SNP policy of essentially shutting down North sea oil and having no intention at all to develop nuclear. That would be an utterly irresponsible and highly expensive way of dealing with the current problem.

Stephen Flynn: The Secretary of State does himself no favours by attempting to invent policies that are simply not reflective of the SNP's position at this moment in time—but this discussion is about energy bills. If someone lives in the north of Scotland, their energy bill standing charge will increase by some 83%; if they live in the south of Scotland, it will increase by 100%; but if they live here in Westminster, in London, it will increase by just 38%. Scotland is energy-rich—oil and gas, wave, wind, tidal, hydro pumped storage. How on earth can the Secretary of State justify the inequity in such pricing?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman is indeed correct: Scotland is extremely wealthy in its range of energy sources. That is why we have sought to encourage it through things like the £27 million Aberdeen energy transition zone and the North sea transition deal. We have constantly supported the Scottish energy industry. The hon. Gentleman refers to a report by Ofgem. I speak to it regularly, and we always try to see what we can do to justify and to equalise bills across the UK.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has announced that he will publish an energy supply strategy to deal with the UK's energy requirements for the short, medium

and long term. Can the Secretary of the State update the House on when we can expect the strategy to be published?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Very shortly.

Renewable Energy Sector

3. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What plans he has to support the development of the renewable energy sector. [906338]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): As the hon. Lady will know, few countries have done as well as we have in respect of offshore wind. We are backing a range of other technologies through our strategy, and also through the 10-point plan.

Munira Wilson: Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made clear how crucial it is for the UK to press on with the push to roll out renewables and strengthen its energy security. Almost three weeks ago, the Prime Minister said that an energy independence plan would be unveiled in the next few days and there was speculation about a renewed push for onshore wind, but that plan has been delayed again, apparently because the Chancellor is blocking it. Will the Secretary of State explain why the Chancellor is now deciding energy policy?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady will understand that, when such publications are issued, a range of cross-Government "write-rounds" is required. We are constantly talking to colleagues across Government, not just in the Treasury, so that we can land the energy strategy as quickly as possible.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Getting on top of energy issues, particularly those relating to renewable energy, is the most difficult challenge in rural areas such as mine. How will the Secretary of State's strategy—to be launched soon—enable the renewable energy sector to grow from the grassroots up, so that people in fuel-poor homes, who may not have the money to buy the necessary equipment at the outset, have an opportunity to install solar panels and battery storage which will help them to deal with the rising cost of energy?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have just cut VAT on many of those products. I have already visited my hon. Friend in his constituency, and I am happy to have further discussions about what more we can do to drive the take-up of these important technologies.

Forced Labour of Uyghurs: UK Supply Chains

4. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that the supply chains of businesses in the UK do not use forced labour of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, China. [906339]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): In January 2021, we announced a robust package of measures to help to ensure that no UK organisations are complicit in the human rights violations being perpetrated in Xinjiang. We have also supplied detailed guidance to UK businesses, and will continue to engage with them.

Afzal Khan: I have lost count of the number of times I have urged the Government to take stronger, more robust action against China's ongoing genocide of Uyghur Muslims. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was spot on when he said that UK organisations must immediately sever their commercial ties with Russia to ensure that public money is not funding Putin's war machine. In the light of a genocide that is happening on our watch, is it not high time that the Government applied the same rules and ensured that public organisations sever their contracts with Xinjiang? Will they also support amendments to the Health and Care Bill to prevent the NHS from being complicit in forced Uyghur labour?

Paul Scully: Evidence of the scale and severity of the human rights situation in Xinjiang paints a harrowing picture. The British Government will not stand for forced labour, wherever it takes place. We require businesses to report on how they are tackling modern slavery and forced labour in their operations and supply chains, and we plan to extend that to certain public bodies and to introduce financial penalties for organisations which do not comply. That will require legislative change, and legislation will be introduced when parliamentary time allows.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): That was a pretty strong-sounding answer from the Minister, but let us see whether those fine words are put into practice. An audit undertaken two years ago found that 17% of organisations—more than 2,500—that should have published a modern slavery statement had failed to do so. Can the Minister tell us what action has been taken since then to ensure that they do?

Paul Scully: On 11 March 2021, the Government launched an online modern slavery statement registry, and we are now encouraging all organisations within the scope of the legislation to submit their statements to it. More than 7,000 statements have been submitted, covering more than 23,350 organisations on that voluntary basis.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Canadian Solar wants to build a solar plant in my constituency the size of 1,400 football pitches. In 2021, four of its shipments were seized owing to its links with Uyghur blood labour, and its subsidiary GCL-Poly has been sanctioned by the United States Government because of its complicity in genocide. Will my hon. Friend assure me that we will blacklist from nationally significant infrastructure projects all those companies that are complicit in genocide, and confirm that we will not allow blood labour to stain our green and pleasant lands?

Paul Scully: As I have said, we have strong procedures to vet suppliers, and we have been given repeated written assurances from people who supply that they proactively monitor supply chains to ensure that forced labour is not used. We will of course ensure that the company to which my hon. Friend has referred comes within that robust supervision.

Standing Charges on Energy Bills

5. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on consumers of removing standing charges on energy bills. [906340]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): As the hon. Lady knows, the standing charge is designed to reflect the costs of connectivity and usually covers the fixed costs that the suppliers incur. If it was removed, that cost would simply be passed on to consumers. Standing charges are a matter for Ofgem, which has launched a call for evidence. The Government are focused on helping consumers through the £9 billion package of relief announced by the Chancellor a few weeks ago and the £5 billion announced last week to help families and households with the cost of fuel.

Patricia Gibson: From this Friday, households will face an average 80% increase in standing charges for electricity. Negligent policy making and bad practice in the industry will be paid for by the poorest and most vulnerable consumers, who will pay the highest standing charges, with those in Scotland amongst the hardest hit. Will the Minister consider capping or even scrapping these standing charges on the basis that they are discriminatory to the poorest and most vulnerable consumers?

George Freeman: If it was as straightforward as that, the answer might be simple, but it is not—[HON. MEMBERS: "Yes it is!"] No, it is not. The energy market is extremely complex, and there is a whole raft of charges. It is not true to say that Scottish consumers are hit particularly hard, as Scotland is also a net exporter and English and Welsh consumers are paying for it. The Government are absolutely focused on helping consumers with the cost of energy through the £9 billion relief announced in February, the £5 billion announced last week, the extra money for the warm home bonus and all the support mechanisms for the vulnerable. It is not simply a case of constantly tinkering with market price.

Energy Security: Nuclear Power

6. Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): What assessment he has made of the capacity of the UK's nuclear power generation industry to strengthen energy security. [906341]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley): Nuclear energy is crucial in providing low-carbon baseload power, which, over the long term, assists in reducing our reliance on fossil fuels and our exposure to volatile global prices. We will continue to emphasise the vital role of the nuclear sector, including in the forthcoming energy supply strategy.

Suzanne Webb: Our very own atomic kitten, my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), and I are going on a road trip to Hinkley Point C. When I did my research for the visit, I noticed that £5 million-worth of business opportunities had been realised by 36 companies in the west midlands, including three in my constituency,

on the back of Hinkley Point C. Does the Minister agree that our investment in nuclear energy is not just about clean energy but about the supply chain opportunities that it will bring to small and medium-sized enterprises and manufacturing in my constituency?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend is right to emphasise not only the importance of nuclear in concept but the huge significance of the supply chain, which is estimated to support more than 60,000 jobs across the whole of the United Kingdom, including in SMEs in Stourbridge and Ynys Môn. And if I may shove in my knowledge of early 2000s pop music, we are working hard to make the nuclear industry whole again. [*Laughter.*]

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): That was written by a member of *Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark*, so we will give the Minister that.

Energy security is of vital significance, particularly at the moment, and nuclear is part of the clean energy mix. Does the Minister understand that the United Kingdom, which has the second highest tidal range on planet Earth after Canada, is not making anything like sufficient use of that permanent tidal energy? Will he look again at his Government's policies on tidal, marine and hydro energy and give a boost not only to Cumbria and its energy coast but to the whole country?

Lee Rowley: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the importance of a diversified and secure energy supply. This is one of the reasons that the Government are looking at all forms, including tidal, and it is why we would encourage people from across the House to agree not just with tidal but with nuclear as well.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): In the 2018 nuclear sector deal, £20 million was pledged towards Britain's first thermal hydraulic testing facility, in north Wales. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that the UK establish world-leading capabilities in thermal hydraulics, and can he provide an update on the next steps for this vital investment?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend is an absolute champion of the nuclear industry. I believe that this proposal would make the UK third in the world. We are working hard to see what can be done and I will certainly pass on her keenness for progress to be made.

Contracts for Difference: Environmental Performance of Holders

7. **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What steps he is taking to monitor the environmental performance of holders of existing Contracts for Difference in the context of new standards agreed at COP 26. [906342]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): The contracts for difference scheme is a flagship scheme that has contributed to our fivefold increase in renewables since 2010. High environmental performance is a prerequisite for contracts for difference applications, and the next CFD round will require even more ambition from applicants.

Tommy Sheppard: I, like many people, have difficulty understanding how burning trees on an industrial scale and pumping carbon dioxide into the atmosphere can be any part of a low-carbon solution, or indeed why the British taxpayer subsidises private companies to do this. Given the Glasgow declaration and the new COP26 standards, is it not time to review whether the British taxpayer should remain the world's largest subsidiser of tree burning and, in particular, whether contracts for difference on biomass awarded before 2015 would now be awarded were they to meet the new standards and targets?

Paul Scully: As a condition of receiving payment under the contracts for difference scheme, generators must demonstrate that they meet our biomass sustainability criteria, irrespective of where that biomass is sourced. There is no evidence that deforestation has occurred in the areas from where UK electricity generators source their biomass, but we must make sure biomass is sourced from areas that are managed consistently with sustainable forest management practices.

Investment in UK Manufacturing

8. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps he is taking to support investment in UK manufacturing. [906343]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley): The UK remains one of the world's largest manufacturing nations, and the Government agree that manufacturing plays a vital role in the health of the UK economy. It is ultimately for British manufacturers to make decisions on their own strategies, but the Government continue to support them through a range of initiatives on productivity, costs, innovation and investment, ranging from Made Smarter to the catapults and the global Britain investment fund.

Jack Brereton: I very much welcome the Prime Minister's response last week to my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) that energy-intensive manufacturers such as ceramics will be covered by the upcoming British energy security strategy. These sectors are more important than ever, particularly for future technology, and they need support to address high energy costs now. Will my hon. Friend the Minister do more to support ceramic manufacturers to invest in new technologies and increased energy efficiency?

Lee Rowley: There is no bigger champion of the ceramics industry than my hon. Friend and his colleagues from Stoke, who work as an excellent team in supporting the industry as a whole. The Government have worked with industry for many years to mitigate the costs of energy, including an aggregate of £2 billion-worth of subsidy since 2013. From our multitude of conversations on the ceramics industry with him and his colleagues, I know he will encourage manufacturers in his constituency to consider other opportunities such as the industrial energy transformation fund.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Earlier this month, bosses triggered a consultation on redundancies at Liberty Pressing Solutions, a business in my constituency that produces high-quality products for the automotive industry. Financial difficulties at its parent company,

the Gupta Family Group Alliance, have put its future in doubt, and with it the jobs of more than 200 people. I visited the factory and met the company's skilled, dedicated workers, who risk being plunged into unemployment just as the cost of living crisis intensifies. What is the Minister doing to protect skilled jobs such as these, which are vital in transitioning to a green and sustainable economy? Will he meet me to discuss how we can save these jobs?

Lee Rowley: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the importance of a strong manufacturing base, which is one reason why we have spent so much time supporting and having active discussions with manufacturing. The challenges around Liberty are well known, and I have also visited Liberty sites in recent weeks and months. I am happy to meet her to talk further.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Manufacturers will open their factory doors on 7 July in a UK-wide open house, which is an opportunity to showcase the diversity of the sector, the range of highly skilled jobs on offer and the amazing opportunities for reskilling and career development within UK manufacturing. Will the Minister join me in supporting National Manufacturing Day 2022?

Lee Rowley: I could hardly say no. I look forward to doing that and visiting many great manufacturers across the country. We are highlighting the brilliant work of the sector, and we continue to champion it as a vital part of the UK economy.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The Government are well aware of the crisis they have created for energy-intensive industries such as those on Teesside. Now that the EU has set aside €50 million to help its firms with energy costs, British firms such as CF Fertilisers, which have no such support, face even tougher competition. I know the Minister is visiting the company tomorrow, but what will the Government do to address the impact of this EU funding on UK fertiliser production? Can he advise on when a decision will be taken about renewing the electricity compensation scheme for energy-intensive industries, which runs out on Thursday?

Lee Rowley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. He will be aware of the substantial support we have given manufacturers over many years, including more than £2 billion to mitigate energy prices. I note that in Teesside there have been recent announcements that demonstrate the confidence people have within manufacturing as a whole.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): My hon. Friend will know that small and medium-sized manufacturers make up the core of the manufacturing base in the Black Country, but many of mine in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton will be slightly concerned that they have missed out on investment because of their size. Will he meet me and manufacturers from the Black Country to discuss how we can ensure that they make the most of the packages on offer for them to succeed?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency. I have been to the west midlands regularly to talk about the importance of the manufacturing base, and I would be happy to meet him to talk about West Bromwich.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): In the past, the Nigg oil fabrication facility in Easter Ross built some of the mightiest production platforms for the UK—I worked in that yard. Today, wind turbines for both onshore and offshore power seem to be built anywhere but in Scotland. The firm that owns the Nigg yard announced plans almost four months to get into fabrication, but since then we have not heard a lot. I do not expect the Minister to have the answer at his fingertips, but will he ask his Department to see how progress is coming along on that front, because it is crucial for the local workforce?

Lee Rowley: I would be very happy to speak to the Department and come back to the hon. Gentleman on that.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Investment is attracted to areas that have agile, pro-growth regulatory environments. In this country, we delegate a lot of the implementation of regulation to agencies, but the oversight and assessment of regulatory agency performance is weak. Will the Minister look at ways in which we can improve how we regulate the regulators?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend highlights an important point about getting the balance right between regulation, and ensuring that the output and productivity of these industries works. I would be happy to talk to him more if that is helpful.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Bill Esterson.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The spring statement did not

“address the complex challenges facing the manufacturing sector”.

It just is not

“tenable for thousands of businesses”

and it is

“kicking the can down the road”.

Those are the words of three businesses that are asking for help. So how about this: first, cancel the 10% increase in national insurance payroll tax; secondly, cut energy bills by up to £600 per household; and, thirdly, set up a £600 million energy-intensive industries contingency fund? Our plan is following the evidence from the business community of what is needed. Why will this Government not help businesses that are crying out for support?

Lee Rowley: The hon. Gentleman highlights the importance of manufacturing, which we have already talked about in these questions. This Government are a champion of manufacturing—[*Interruption.*] I am so glad that all Opposition Members agree with me. If they really do, they would recognise that ensuring a strong manufacturing base is incredibly important. The Labour party can provide no lessons, on the basis that it decimated manufacturing before 2010.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I am glad now to know who the Minister's favourite in Stoke-on-Trent is. Steelite, based in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, received funding from the regional growth fund, but it is being asked to pay back £685,000 plus interest due to capital underspend. The reason for that is simple: a global pandemic came across in March 2020, so it was not viable for Steelite to invest in capital when it did not even know whether it was going to

continue to exist or how long the pandemic was going to last. Will my hon. Friend meet me and representatives of Steelite to discuss how that funding can continue to stay, so that Steelite can add to its factory and therefore employ more people locally?

Lee Rowley: I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to talk about that in more detail.

Small Businesses' Rising Costs

9. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support small businesses with rising costs. [906344]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): The Government are cutting fuel duty, at a cost of £5 billion over the next 12 months; raising the employment allowance to £5,000; and zero-rating VAT on energy-saving materials. That builds on existing support, including business rates relief worth £7 billion over five years.

Mary Glendon: Businesses such as Sidhu's chippies in my constituency had pinned their hopes on the Chancellor reducing VAT to 12.5%. They are now going to be pushed to the brink as energy costs are set to almost triple this financial year. What hope can the Minister offer Sidhu's and other businesses that have served their local communities for decades but now cannot guarantee jobs and services into the future?

Paul Scully: Our hospitality strategy, which includes fish and chip shops and other restaurants around the country, has a number of workstreams to co-create solutions with businesses rather than the Government having all the answers. The hon. Lady needs to consider the issue in the round, including the business rates relief and other support that we have given of £408 billion over the past two years.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): Supporting businesses to manage their costs must not come at the expense of employment rights. The P&O ferry scandal is not about fire and rehire, but it puts the issue back in the spotlight because it exposes how vulnerable workers can be when faced with an exploitative employer who is willing to trample over their statutory rights to slash wages. At the Dispatch Box last week, my hon. Friend the Minister intimated that the Government would make further announcements on the issue. May I press him to tell the House today whether the Government are prepared to act definitively on fire and rehire?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend, who has been a doughty champion on the issue. The Government have always been clear that it is completely unacceptable for any sized business to use threats of fire and rehire simply as a negotiation tactic. We have already taken action. In November last year, we commissioned ACAS, which published guidance. I promised to take further steps, as she rightly said, and I am pleased to announce that we will bring forward a statutory code later this year under section 203 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992. We will introduce that as soon as parliamentary time allows. The code will have legal teeth; it will be admissible in evidence before courts and employment tribunals in England, Scotland and Wales.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Businesses face a barrage of rising costs: inflation at a 30-year high, taxation at an 80-year high, and rocketing prices for materials, energy, food and fuel that are hitting businesses and consumers hard. This is a Government of photo ops but shuttered shops, with no clear plan to support businesses and workers, and their spring statement does not go far enough. Does that not make Labour's call for an increase to the small business rates relief threshold even more urgent? Or is the truth not plain to see that small businesses can no longer afford the Conservatives?

Paul Scully: Nobody—whether in a domestic or business setting—can afford Labour. We have put £408 billion of support into wrapping our arms around jobs, livelihoods and businesses. We have 408 billion reasons to get this next bit right. The Labour party can talk about scrapping business rates, but it has not made any suggestion of what to replace them with. Fine words, but we will act.

Investment in Renewables: Household Energy Bills

10. **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of trends in the level of investment in renewables on household energy bills. [906345]

18. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of trends in the level of investment in renewables on household energy bills. [906353]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): Achieving the UK's ambitious net zero target to prevent global warming and climate emergency beyond 1.5° and protect consumers from global price volatility will require significant extra investment in renewable electricity generation. We have seen the cost of renewable technologies, most notably offshore wind, reduce fast and as more renewables are added to the system, household electricity bills will be less affected by fluctuations in volatile global gas prices.

Karl McCartney: An effective way for household energy bills in Lincoln and across the UK to be cut by 25% right now is through the removal of the renewables surcharge on everyone's bills, even temporarily. Have the Minister and his colleagues put that simple idea to their Treasury colleagues?

George Freeman: I can assure my hon. Friend that lots of ideas have been put to Treasury colleagues. The truth is that the falling cost of UK renewables, with offshore wind now down 60% through the contract for difference, is the best protection against global supply chain volatility. This country has led the way. In the past 30 years, we have grown the economy by 78% and reduced emissions by 44%. The Government focused on helping consumers, households and businesses with direct support and that is why the Chancellor announced £9 billion of relief in his February package, £5 billion last week, contrary to the claim from the Opposition that nothing was done, and extra funding for the warm home scheme and winter fuel levy.

Dr Evans: Constituents in Bosworth are concerned about three things: the cost of their energy bills, the environmental impact and the security of our energy supply. While being mindful of those three things, does my hon. Friend agree that a transition period is paramount while we deal with the fallout of a war, with rising energy prices and, of course, with meeting our net zero targets?

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes an important point that has not been picked up by the Opposition. We are emerging from a global pandemic and experiencing a war in Europe. Those are two unprecedented shocks to the global energy system. The Government have done everything necessary through the pandemic and we are doing it again on energy, but in the end we are in a global energy market and the best strategy, as my hon. Friend sets out, is the transition plan we have put in place, with strong support for renewables and help with the cost of energy in the short term for consumers, businesses and households.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): For Norway to feed energy into our national grid it costs £1.36 per MWh, for Belgium it is 77p per MWh, for France, 17p and for Germany, Luxembourg and The Netherlands it costs not a penny. Can the Minister explain how Scotland can exploit its renewable potential when it costs £7.36 per MWh to feed into the grid?

George Freeman: I am delighted to explain how Scotland can benefit from our renewables programme: the North sea transition deal, the net zero hydrogen fund, the industrial energy transformation fund, £20 million ringfenced for Scottish tidal, £40 million for carbon capture and storage, and £27 million for the Aberdeen energy transition zone. Frankly, we need fewer complaints from the Scottish nationalists and more support for the Scottish energy sector.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a little disappointing that the Minister could not just give a straightforward no to the question from the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karl McCartney). Moving on, however, there are more than 600 wind and solar projects in the UK that already have planning permission. Will the Government admit they made a mistake in stopping the development of onshore wind, and fast-track those projects? They already have planning permission and are ready to go ahead. They are the answer to meeting our energy needs in the future.

George Freeman: The evidence suggests that the UK is the fastest economy in the G7 in deploying renewables. Offshore wind costs have fallen by 60%. Of course, everyone can do more, but I do not accept the criticism that we have not been in the vanguard; we have been, and we are, and offshore wind and solar have been fundamental to reducing the cost of renewables. That is the best support against rising energy prices.

Energy Transition Projects in Scotland

11. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What plans he has to support new energy transition projects in Scotland. [906346]

13. **Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP): What plans he has to support new energy transition projects in Scotland. [906348]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): I am delighted to assure hon. Members that Scotland is at the heart of the UK's transition to net zero—something I hope they will welcome. In November last year, we committed £20 million to the funding for tidal stream projects through the contracts for difference, giving Scotland's significant marine energy sector a chance to develop its expertise. We have also allocated £40 million in carbon capture development funding for the Acorn Project and £27 million for the Aberdeen energy transition zone.

Patrick Grady: I am sure the rest of the UK welcomes that contribution to renewable energy as well, but local communities up and down the country, such as Partick in Glasgow North, want to champion the just transition by generating their own local renewable electricity. If the Local Electricity Bill, which has cross-party support on both sides of the House, is brought back in the next Session, will the Government make time and support it?

George Freeman: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, which I will pass on to my hon. Friend the Energy Minister, who is currently suffering from covid. We have put money into the community energy fund. We are supporting community energy and we are passionate not just about the big infrastructure but, as the hon. Gentleman says, about community energy schemes.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): The University of Stirling has cut its carbon emissions by 43.8% since 2007. It has an ambitious target to achieve net zero by 2040, with fantastic plans for a solar farm, geothermal developments, the repurposing of an existing combined heat and power plant, and hydro. However, it is finding that those developments are held back by a lack of UK Government support and the rhetoric is often not matched by the reality. Will the Minister, in a constructive spirit, meet me to see whether we can crack through the paperwork and support those great projects?

George Freeman: As Minister for Science, Research and Innovation I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman. The university is doing great work. We have just announced and made the allocation of the biggest increase for a generation in science, research and innovation funding for universities, and I would be very happy to meet him and see what we can do to support that cluster.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I thank the Minister for reminding the House that this is a transition, not an extinction. Can he confirm that, as part of the North sea transition deal, we need to keep extracting hydrocarbons for the ongoing, albeit declining, demand that we have in this country and to support investment and jobs in that industry? Finally, does he agree that the companies on which the Opposition parties, including the SNP, want to slap an arbitrary windfall tax are precisely those companies that have the skills, the knowledge, the expertise, the technology and the capital to invest in the energy transition that this country desperately needs, and that we can show the world how it is done?

George Freeman: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. It is surprising not to hear the Scottish nationalists welcoming the North sea transition deal a bit more. To remind the House, it is a programme that will draw on the expertise in Scotland's offshore North sea oil and gas sector and help it to lead the transition to carbon capture and storage, hydrogen, offshore wind and tidal, and it is set to create over 40,000 jobs and attract £14 billion of investment. That is the best way—and frankly, the best thing the SNP here could do is to help their colleagues in Scotland to support it.

Net Zero Targets: Synthetic Fuels

12. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential role of synthetic fuels in achieving net zero targets. [906347]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley): The net zero strategy highlighted the potential importance of sustainable and synthetic fuels as part of the transition to net zero and committed to additional strategies. In aviation, the Government have already announced their ambition to deliver 10% sustainable aviation fuels by 2030.

Greg Smith: In our inquiry, “Fuelling the future”, the Transport Committee has heard significant evidence of the role that synthetic fuels can play as drop-in fuels that mean that vehicles, aircraft, ships, cars and plant do not have to be changed—the fuel just works in them. Given this, will my hon. Friend commit to ensure that synthetic fuels and their development are given equal billing with other energy sources?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend makes two crucial points: first, that technological innovation—the ingenuity of human endeavour—is crucially important in helping us to get to net zero in the first place; and secondly, that it is very important that we let a multitude of technologies and innovations grow and develop, working in conjunction with private enterprise, to help to solve society's challenges.

Oil and Gas Authority: Change of Name

14. **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Whether he was involved in the decision of the Oil and Gas Authority to change its name to the North Sea Transition Authority. [906349]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley): The North Sea Transition Authority decided to change its name to reflect its important role in the energy transition, driving the UK upstream oil and gas industry towards net zero. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was consulted on and supported this change.

Caroline Lucas: No amount of greenwash can hide the fact that the Oil and Gas Authority's primary purpose is to pump every last drop of oil and gas from the North sea, but the International Energy Agency report that was commissioned by this Government is clear that there can be no new exploration for fossil fuels. Let me pre-empt the Minister's response by saying that no one is suggesting turning off the taps tomorrow, as he

regularly claims. We absolutely need a transition that is fair to workers; what we do not need is a so-called climate pass to allow the Government to ignore climate consequences and license more explorations supposedly on the grounds of national security. Can he assure us that he recognises that climate change is itself an issue of national security, and that if we are serious about our net zero commitments there can be no exemptions from the climate compatibility checkpoints?

Lee Rowley: If the hon. Lady accepts the principle of transition, then she needs to accept the principle that we will need oil and gas for a number of years yet. That is logical, simple and understood. The only greenwashing that is going on is the Green party pretending that it is interested in green issues when it is only interested in socialism.

Topical Questions

T1. [906326] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): Since we last met, my Department has been focused on three central strands. First, we are pleased to announce the passing of the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022. Secondly, we have worked with Ukrainian colleagues to make sure that generators are arriving in Ukraine so that their public services can be powered and delivered. Thirdly, I am pleased to announce that we are phasing out imports of Russian oil over a nine-month period to make sure, with our allies, that the Kremlin does not benefit from its sale of hydrocarbons.

Munira Wilson: Small businesses across my constituency are struggling, like households, with spiralling energy costs. The British Chambers of Commerce reports that three out of four firms it surveyed will be passing on these costs to customers through higher prices, thus further fuelling the cost of living crisis for many people in Twickenham and across the country. What will the Secretary of State do to alleviate the pressure on small and medium-sized enterprises that are facing rising energy bills?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady will know that not only did my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announce a £9 billion package particularly for the most vulnerable, but for all our citizens, a few weeks ago, but last week we announced a support package, again, for vulnerable customers. In relation to small business, she will know that over the past two years this Government have spent £405 billion in supporting businesses of all sizes through a very difficult pandemic and, again, through the heightened crisis that has been brought on by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are on topicals and we need to speed up.

T3. [906328] **Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): What steps is my hon. Friend taking to support businesses with increased energy bills? Companies such as Rodale Commercials Ltd in Loughborough use high levels of gas in the painting process to repair vehicles.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): It is great that my hon. Friend is supporting Rodale and other companies in her area. We know that this is a worrying time for business, which is facing significant increases in global gas prices. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is in regular contact with the energy industry and Ofgem to manage the impact of price increases on businesses. Clearly, we need to look at this in the round, and in the context of the £408 billion that we provided throughout covid to allow businesses such as Rodale to survive.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Last October the Secretary of State promised support for energy-intensive industries such as steel, glass and ceramics. His exact words were that it was his “priority...to ensure costs are managed and supplies of energy are maintained.”

Yet six months later there is still no action, and there was nothing in last week’s spring statement, so when will this promised support be presented?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman will know that support is ongoing. We have the industrial energy transformation fund, which has allocated more than £50 million. We have also supported EIIs—energy-intensive industries—to the tune of £2 billion since 2013, so support is always there and has been ongoing.

Jonathan Reynolds: A chemicals manufacturer in Grimsby has been in touch with me this week. Its energy bill last year was £10 million; it has now gone up to £50 million a year. And it gets worse, because as we have heard in questions today, in two days’ time, compensation for the UK emissions trading scheme and the carbon price support mechanism comes to an end, so support is actually decreasing. Will the Secretary of State at least do the bare minimum and reassure firms today that that support fund will be extended?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I will reassure businesses that I engage with that we are constantly engaging in conversations with our Treasury colleagues and across Government to see how best we can use the existing schemes to support industries—the steel industry, ceramics industry and chemicals industry—in this difficult time.

T4. [906330] **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I thank the small business Minister for speaking to our Staffordshire chamber of commerce event in Parliament recently. Recruitment continues to be a challenge for many businesses across Stoke-on-Trent, so will my hon. Friend outline what more we can do to support small businesses, particularly to upskill and recruit more workers?

Paul Scully: It was a pleasure to speak to the Staffordshire chamber of commerce. The Department for Work and Pensions’ “Way to Work” campaign is a drive to help employers to fill vacancies faster by streamlining recruitment processes and offering employers a named adviser. The Department is also supporting people to upskill through skills boot camps and sector-based work academies.

T2. [906327] **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): We have world-leading motor neurone disease scientists here in the UK who are on the cusp of developing the first ever treatments for this disease. Patients, scientists

and charities were promised that by the end of January we would know how the £50 million of targeted MND research funding would be allocated. It is now the end of March. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the funding will be awarded quickly and in full, and via a single application process, as set out by MND charities in the 2021 spending review submission?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): As former Minister for life science and Minister for research, I would be very happy to meet with the hon. Member to talk that through. We have just made the biggest allocation for science, research and innovation, which included £9 billion for health research.

T5. [906331] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): I very much welcome the Chancellor scrapping VAT on home energy-saving products in his spring statement last week. Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree that now really is the time to turbo-charge a green homes programme? Let us insulate homes and help people to cut their energy bills and keep warm.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend knows that energy efficiency is at the centre of any net zero strategy, and I would be happy to work with him to ensure that we can drive progress in this area.

T8. [906334] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): People already struggling to make ends meet will be hit by an increase in the unit price of electricity next month, and for many in Wales their daily standing charge will also double. In the interests of transparency and fairness, has the Department considered the merits of introducing a system of single unit pricing, so that consumers can more easily compare the costs charged by energy providers?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the Department continually looks at a range of schemes to see how best we can lighten the burden of rising energy prices.

T6. [906332] **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): On nuclear, there has been much talk of the small modular reactors created by Rolls-Royce, which the Government are rightly supporting, and lots of talk of the progress on nuclear fusion at Culham in Oxfordshire. What is the Department’s assessment of progress on these technologies? How can we increase the speed of their deployment, and what policy interventions might help with that?

George Freeman: That is an excellent question. We can be very proud: UK scientists at Harwell recently demonstrated the ability to generate temperatures equivalent to those on the sun at the flick of a switch, and Rolls-Royce is ready to roll out and industrialise small nuclear reactors over the next 10 to 15 years. We are looking to accelerate their deployment to help tackle the global energy crisis.

T9. [906335] **Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): For the 11,500 Cynon Valley households in receipt of social security benefits, the spring statement offered absolutely nothing. Inflation is anticipated to reach 9%, and they are expected to use a disproportionate amount of their income to cover energy cost increases

of 50% in April—and another 40% increase is forecast for October. There is to be a social security payment increase of a paltry and quite insulting 3.1%, which links back to the inflation rate in September last year. What consideration have the Government given to introducing a low income energy tariff, so that they can better target support at lower-income households, as suggested by the Welsh Government?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As the hon. Lady is aware, we have made a number of interventions that have gone some way to lightening the burden. There is the £9 billion that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a few weeks ago, and £150 off council tax for those in bands A to D. I have reassured the House that we are looking at a range of measures to see how best we can meet the challenge of the next few months. Nobody knows where the price cap will be in October.

T7. [906333] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The price cap, the cut in fuel duty and the warm home discount are providing vital help with bills, but will the Government commit to further action, domestically and internationally, to try to get energy prices down, so that we can help pensioners and other vulnerable groups?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to identify this as an issue. That is why we are working, not only in Government but across G7 partners, to ensure diverse sources of energy supply, which can keep prices down.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): In Chopwell in my constituency, over 200 homes were due to benefit from cladding under the green homes grant local authority delivery scheme, but due to escalating costs, that work has been cancelled. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can ensure that the work is carried out?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As the hon. Lady knows, local authority delivery of the green homes grant was very successful, but I would be very happy to meet her to discuss the case she mentions.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): Last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made the welcome announcement that employment leave would be extended to unpaid carers. Will he please update the House on when that is likely to be delivered?

Paul Scully: I recommit to our manifesto commitment to introduce carers' leave. That will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows. We are looking forward to getting on with that as soon as possible.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): South Yorkshire is home to some extraordinary research and development assets, including the University of Sheffield Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre and the Advanced Wellbeing and Research Centre. It was great to meet the Minister recently to discuss the issue. Will he continue to work with me and others on unlocking the undoubtedly huge potential in South Yorkshire?

George Freeman: With absolute pleasure. The South Yorkshire cluster is becoming a world-class, globally

recognised leader in advanced manufacturing and associated industries. I look forward to supporting that cluster.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Geothermal energy from old coalmines can heat our homes for years to come. Will the Secretary of State please assure me that he is doing all he can to support the Coal Authority in developing this fantastic new energy opportunity?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We are, absolutely, excited about the prospects for geothermal. I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this. I was happy, also, to talk to my Cornish colleagues about this exciting new technology; it is something on which we are focused.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The pupils of Boroughmuir High School's climate change society in my constituency have impressed on me that their generation is relying on us to take action right now, because by the time they are old enough to do so it will be too late for systemic change. Can the Secretary of State reassure school students in my constituency that his plans for transition have the requisite urgency?

Kwasi Kwarteng: They do. I was very pleased to take up my office as Minister of State for Energy a month after the net zero legislation was passed, and for the last three years we have been resolutely focused on living up to the letter of the law, fulfilling our bargain and making sure we reach net zero in 2050.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Secretary of State is well aware of the opportunities for further developing the renewables sector in my Cleethorpes constituency and the wider Humber region. However, as he is also aware, there have been one or two setbacks of late. Will he meet me and neighbouring colleagues to discuss how we can move forward and maximise such opportunities?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend. I am very excited about what is going on in his constituency and the wider Humber area, and I look forward to talking to him about decarbonisation.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Unscrupulous company directors make use of the compulsory strike-off process to avoid paying debts to both private and public sector creditors. In considering reform of Companies House, what can Ministers do to tackle this practice?

Paul Scully: We are looking at a range of methods of reforming Companies House, including unscrupulous behaviour by directors. It will be the biggest upheaval of companies law for the last 150 years, and we will legislate for new powers in the economic crime Bill when parliamentary time allows.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that there is a distinct difference between the current energy price spikes and the long-standing unfairness that UK steel makers face when it comes to the charges and levies they pay on their energy costs. Does he agree that, when the energy strategy that the Prime Minister promised comes out, it must address both these distinct and separate issues?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would be happy to talk to my hon. Friend about those issues. I would like to point out that we had a significant victory in extending the safeguards last summer, and there has been some very good news on trade talks about the quotas that steel companies in this country are allowed by the US.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The energy crisis is leaving some people in my constituency struggling to pay their bills, and the situation is even worse for those whose heating is paid for centrally and is not protected by the energy price cap. In some cases, many have seen their bills go up by more than 500%, so when will the Secretary of State bring forward legislation that will give Ofgem the powers to regulate these prices and end these excessive energy price increases?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Member will know that we are speaking with Ofgem about this very issue. Yes, the price cap does protect the vast majority of people, but there is an issue with people off grid, which I would be very happy to talk to her about.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): There is great concern in North West Durham among constituents affected by Storm Arwen about the prospect of being left without a landline as well as without power during a storm, due to the switch to the voice over internet protocol. Given that, does the Secretary of State, like me, welcome the announcement from BT today that this forced switch will now be paused and be

on request only, as BT looks to ensure that proper back-up systems are in place during power cuts before returning to the broader roll-out?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I welcome the announcement. I was also very pleased to spend time with my hon. Friend in the unfortunate circumstances of Storm Arwen, and I look forward to the publication of that report soon.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Returning to off grid, Ofgem's mission statement says that it aims

"to make a positive difference for all energy consumers, both now and in the future",

yet off-gas grid consumers using electricity, oil and liquid gas face price rises in April four times that of Ofgem's average consumer. Will the Secretary of State support my calls to regulate this for off-gas grid customers through Ofgem, and indeed support my Energy Pricing (Off Gas Grid Households) Bill?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Where I agree with the hon. Gentleman is that we need to have a more robust offer for people who are off grid. This issue has been raised continually in these exceptional times, and I look forward to speaking to Ofgem—and perhaps him—about these issues.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. That finishes questions, but before we come to the statement, 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).

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Review

12.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement about our mission to level up opportunities for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in England. Before I do, I want to praise my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), the fantastic Minister for Children and Families, who has been supported by my hon. Friends the Members for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) and for Wantage (David Johnston). I thank them for the level of engagement they have had with Members across the House, as well as with many wonderful people from across the SEND and alternative provision system. I also thank all those working in early years, schools and colleges, including specialist and alternative provision, for their dedication to service in the face of ongoing covid difficulties. I am sure my gratitude will be echoed across the House.

This review has been shaped by children with special educational needs and disabilities and in alternative provision, by their families and teachers, and by the committed workforce across education, health and care sharing their experiences and stories. I send them huge thanks for their openness in sharing emotional, and sometimes difficult experiences with us. We have listened, and in response today I am publishing for public consultation the Government's "Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and Alternative Provision Green Paper."

In schools in England alone there are 1.4 million pupils with a diverse range of special educational needs, and too often they do not get the support they need. In 2014 we made far-reaching changes to support children with special educational needs and disabilities, and their families—indeed, in 2016 I was the Minister for Children and Families. Those reforms gave critical support to more children, but in reality the system is not working as it should. Too often decisions about support are based on where a child lives, not on what they need, and many have lost confidence in the system. On top of that, the alternative provision system is increasingly used to support children with special educational needs, but the outcomes for many of those children remain shockingly poor. We have therefore considered alternative provision within this review.

Despite unprecedented investment through a £1 billion increase in high needs funding, taking total funding to £9.1 billion in the coming financial year on top of the £1.5 billion increase over the last two years, the system has become financially unsustainable. Local authorities are in deficit and overspending on their dedicated schools grant, with total deficits now standing at more than £1 billion. The publication of the Green Paper is long-awaited, and I am proud to announce that our proposals will build a more inclusive and financially sustainable system, where every child and young person will have access to the right support, in the right place, at the right time.

To meet our ambitions, and the ambitions of so many children and their families, we propose to establish a new single, national special educational needs and disabilities and alternative provision system across education, health and care, setting clear standards for

how children and young people's needs are identified and met. To enable effective local delivery, we propose establishing new statutory SEND partnerships, bringing together education, health and care partners with local government, to create a local inclusion plan. That plan will set out how each local area will meet the needs of children in line with national standards. We will also clarify the roles and responsibilities of every partner in the system, with robust accountabilities to build confidence and transparency.

Locally and nationally published inclusion dashboards will capture and track metrics to drive system performance, and mean that areas respond quickly to emerging local needs. Data and transparency are our allies on this journey. Parents should not need to fight the system; the system should be working and fighting for them. The proposed changes will help parents to know exactly what their child is entitled to, removing their need to fight and guaranteeing them access to mediation, leading to better, earlier and more effective interventions for their child.

I will always be on the side of children and parents. Wherever possible, I want our children to be educated close to home, near to friends and within local communities. Frustratingly for families, that is not happening consistently enough. Today, building on the schools White Paper published yesterday, we are committing to improve mainstream education through early and accurate identification of need, through high-quality teaching of a knowledge-rich curriculum, and through timely access to specialist support, where needed. Change will be underpinned by the increase in our total investment in the national schools budget. As set out in last year's spending review, we will invest an additional £7 billion by 2024-25, compared with 2021-22, including an additional £1 billion in 2022-23 for children and young people with high needs.

I recognise the importance of a confident and empowered workforce with access to the best training to support this cohort of children, and many of my colleagues have made representations to me on that. We will consult on the introduction of a new special educational needs co-ordinator national professional qualification for schools and increase the number of staff with an accredited level 3 SENCO qualification in early years settings.

For some children and young people, specialist provision will be the most appropriate place for them to be able to learn and succeed. For those requiring specialist provision, whether in a mainstream or special school, we propose a simplified process. We will support parents to make informed choices by providing them with a list of appropriate placements tailored to their child's needs, meaning less time spent researching the right school. To prevent needs from escalating, for children with challenging behaviour we want to use the best practice of alternative provision to intervene earlier so that children and young people are supported to thrive, and that the risk of these vulnerable children and young people being exploited or, sadly, involved in serious criminal activities is minimised.

At last year's spending review, we announced an investment of £2.6 billion over three years, delivering tens of thousands more specialist places and improving existing specialist and alternative provision. Today, I can confirm that £1.4 billion of that funding will be capital spending for high needs for academic years 2023-24 and 2024-25, to help local authorities deliver new places quickly. We cannot wait for the Green Paper

consultation; we need to do that now for those with additional needs. That means up to 40 new alternative provision and specialist settings. Taken together, these proposals will improve the special educational needs and disabilities and alternative provision system, delivering the right support in the right place at the right time for children and young people.

Today, I am launching a 13-week consultation on the proposals set out in my Green Paper. This is the opportunity for children and young people, their families, and those working across the special educational needs and disabilities and alternative provision sector to help shape the next stage. We will pay close attention to implementation so that the mistakes of past reforms are not repeated. These reforms are about outcomes, but they are also about fairness: fairness to families who have struggled to get support for their children, to the sector which has gone above and beyond for years, and to children and young people who deserve excellent support to achieve their ambitions. I commend this statement to the House.

12.43 pm

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I start by thanking the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Children with special educational needs and disabilities and how we support them are subjects close to my heart, as they are to so many of us across the House. I had sincerely hoped to speak today with optimism and enthusiasm about the review the Secretary of State has set out today, because one in six children in England have a special educational need or disability—five in every class.

Supporting children and learners with special educational needs or disabilities is at the heart of our education system and the work that teachers and school staff are doing every day, and it should be central to the work of Government too. But right now children are being let down. Needs are going unmet. Children are stuck on waiting lists, for occupational therapy to speech and language support. Thousands of families are waiting months for education health and care plans. Children and families are facing a postcode lottery in availability and quality of specialist provision, and parents are increasingly turning to the courts to get the support that is their children's right.

The system is broken. Parents know it, teachers know it, children know it and the Government know it, too. But we have not got here by accident. The Secretary of State says he is ambitious for young people, but where has that ambition been for the past 12 years? Where was that ambition when he was Minister for Children and Families? The Secretary of State cannot disown the legacy of 12 years of Conservative Governments which has left us with a broken, adversarial and aggressive system that is letting down young people and leaving families in despair.

Against that backdrop, it is hard not to be optimistic about any changes to the system. Early intervention, support in mainstream settings, changing culture, supporting families and making the system financially sustainable—who could object to those ambitions? However, just as we saw yesterday, those ambitions remain sadly hollow: hollow because there is no plan to deliver; hollow because other Government policies are working against those aims; and hollow because children and families are still waiting on a pandemic recovery plan. Too many

parents told us that during the pandemic support for their children was removed, was not available and to this day has not been restored.

When Labour says it is ambitious for children, it means every child. Labour's children's recovery plan sets out the support it would put in place for children and young people now: mental health support in every school, wraparound activities that support every child's development, and targeted learning support for the children who need it most. The pandemic was hard on us all, but for children with SEND and their families it was harder still. The long shadow of those months in lockdown is holding children back, so I ask the Secretary of State again when will he finally give children and families the recovery plan they need and deserve? At every school I visit, teachers and staff raise as one of their biggest concerns the broken system facing children with SEND. That is why we all want reforms to succeed: intervention earlier, children's needs identified sooner and support provided more quickly.

Under the previous Labour Government, children's centres were also crucial. With millions of families accessing those services, children's needs were identified quickly and support put in place, but more than 1,000 children's centres have closed. The family hubs that the Secretary of State announced are a pale imitation of that network of services, yet the evidence is even clearer now than it was then that early intervention and co-ordinated support for families transforms children's lives. As the Minister is keen to consider the evidence—I know he is—will he not look again at the much wider support and services that families across our country are so desperate to see? Many parents who have had to fight for their children's support will today also want assurances from him that there will be no compromising on care to cut costs. Can he say when he expects promised additional educational psychologists to be in place supporting children and schools?

Families have had to wait almost 1,000 days since the SEND review was announced for the Government to launch the consultation. Families will wait another 13 weeks for that consultation to close. They will wait longer for a Government response and then again before changes are seen on the frontline. Years have passed since reform was needed and children's time in the education system is slipping away. Nothing we do in this place can be more important than giving children support to thrive and opportunities for the future, but over the past two years of the pandemic, and the past 12 years of Conservative Governments, all too often our children have been an afterthought. When staff across our schools have been asked to do more with less, they have stepped in and stepped up. They have plugged gaps, taken on more, delivered time and again for the children they are desperate to see succeed. They have put children first and done everything they could. It is long past time the Government did the same.

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady talked about recovery; she will know about the £5 billion announced for education recovery. We have consistently prioritised children and young people with SEND, including through additional weighting for specialist settings. The £1 billion of funding that was announced at the spending review to extend the recovery premium over the next two academic years—2022-23 and 2023-24—should be used by schools to prioritise support for children and young people with SEND.

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

The hon. Lady also spoke about family hubs. I am disappointed that she is not at least giving herself the opportunity to look at the evidence, which is clear, whether in respect of the Harlow family hub that I visited or the one not far from here in Westminster, where she can go—it is probably within walking distance—to see the great work of multiple agencies that are coming together to deliver the most important must-have services to the families towards whom we need to target help. That contrasts with the Labour plan, which sounded great on paper but did not work implementation-wise because it was obsessed with bricks and mortar rather than helping families.

I do not recall any other question from the statement that the hon. Lady made. Suffice it to say that, yet again, as she demonstrated yesterday, there is no plan from Labour.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Education Committee, Robert Halfon.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): My father, like my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's, was an immigrant who came here with very little. He worked hard to send me to private school, but I spent much of my childhood having operations and not being in school. I know very well what it is like to be a child with special educational needs and to have a disability, and I care about this issue very deeply.

I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is getting a grip on this issue, but it is wrong that it has taken almost three years for this Green Paper to come to fruition. It is wrong that for so long parents have had to wade through a treacle of unkind bureaucracy and that, as the Secretary of State has acknowledged, they have been subject to this awful postcode-lottery provision, whereby they wait for months on end to get the EHCP that they should have. There are not enough trained staff—an issue that I recognise the White Paper looks at.

Our Education Committee report made two key recommendations: that there should be a neutral advocate for parents to help them to wade through the bureaucracy—an idea that I urge the Secretary of State to look at again, so that everyone has a fair chance—and that the powers of the social care ombudsman should be extended beyond the school gates, to make sure that children are properly looked after.

The test for us all will be whether parents soon come to our constituency surgeries—I wish it did not have to take more months of consultation—and we no longer hear the awful stories of the struggles they face, and they no longer have to appeal to their MP to try to navigate their way through the system. I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to get this done as soon as possible and to sort it out once and for all, because it is a major social injustice in our education system that children with special educational needs do not have a level playing field.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Education Committee; I will always listen to what he and his Committee have to say, because his Committee follows the evidence and works on a cross-party basis.

My right hon. Friend raised a number of important points that the Green Paper attempts to address, although there is of course a consultation. One of his points was about clarity for parents. Our proposal to establish a single national integrated SEND and AP system in England will help to inform parents wherever they live. If they move house, they will be able to find out what they should expect from the system for their child. It will help them to make informed choices from a tailored list of settings. It will strengthen mediation arrangements so that they do not feel they have to go to tribunal and line the pockets of expensive consultants or lawyers. All these things are addressed in the important Green Paper. Part of the work is to ensure excellent provision from the early years to adulthood and to build inclusivity into the system. We will always listen to what my right hon. Friend has to say.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Following a number of emotional meetings with desperate families in Batley and Spen, I can confirm that the Secretary of State was absolutely right to say that people have lost faith in the system. Demand for EHCPs has soared, rising by 480% in the past five years, and almost half of all plans are issued outside the statutory 20-week period, which in my view is too long in itself. Why has increasing capacity and ending delays not been a focus of the review?

Nadhim Zahawi: Increasing capacity came before the Green Paper, deliberately. I did not want to publish the Green Paper and come to the House and say we were going to wait another 13 weeks. Today's announcement of that first tranche of funding—the £1.4 billion—is all about increasing capacity. There is also, of course, the safety valve that we introduced at the spending review to help local authorities to cope. Over the past three years, the SEND and high-needs budget has increased by 40%, including the £1 billion that we announced at the SR. It needs to be put on a sustainable footing and that is what the Green Paper will do. We will of course always listen to parents, families and those who work so hard in the sector.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I welcome the Green Paper, the new educational psychologists and the new SENCO qualification, but I was concerned to read that just 41% of regular teachers think they have adequate understanding to support young people with special educational needs. We need to make sure that every teacher has a base level of understanding of all types of learning disabilities and of how different brains work differently—as I know as somebody who is dyslexic and dyspraxic and generally a bit eccentric.

I welcome the fact that Ofsted will have a role in looking at the new local inclusion plans, but will the Secretary of State promise me that he will monitor the new Ofsted framework to make sure that it properly holds schools to account, and that if schools fail kids with special needs, that is reflected in their inspection reports?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend is a great champion of those with dyslexia and dyspraxia and has been a great advocate for the need to make sure that every teacher has the required knowledge. I visited Monega school yesterday; a school can be outstanding only if it is outstanding in all areas, including its SEND provision. I will always listen to what my hon. Friend has to say on that.

The White Paper that I published yesterday includes the parent pledge, which is that teachers will identify students' gaps in reading and English language and share that with parents. That should get us to the place where my hon. Friend wants us to be: one where every teacher feels confident that they have the training to identify dyslexia and dyspraxia and deal with them in the appropriate way.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for finally publishing the Green Paper, which is long overdue. How will he ensure that when the system is standardised and simplified, standards improve and are not reduced and truly recognise the unique needs of children with complex disabilities?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that important question. We will make sure that the standards and the single national integrated SEND and AP system are co-created with families, specialists and the whole sector, to make sure we get them right.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My mailbag—much like, I suspect, the mailbags of many other Members—is full of tales from parents who have had difficulty accessing the right care for their children. They say that the process has taken too long and often reaches an unsatisfactory conclusion. Some parents have been pushed into home education to try to meet their children's needs. Will the Secretary of State reassure me and the House that such things will not happen again once his plan is in place?

Nadhim Zahawi: I had a similar experience with a parent in my constituency who got so frustrated that they chose to home-school. They do it very well, but nevertheless that should not happen. The single integrated vision for SEND and AP, the greater focus on the mainstream and the emphasis on early intervention should allow us to regain the confidence of parents. I hope that the ability of parents to navigate the system in a much clearer way, without having to research for themselves which provision is most appropriate for their child, will make that difference. Of course, the consultation means that we will continue to focus on parental rights, including through making sure that parents and carers will continue to express a preference as to which school—from a tailored list of settings, across mainstream, specialist and independent schools—they would like their child to attend.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Green Paper is welcome; it is better late than never. The Secretary of State will know about my great interest as chair of the Westminster Commission on Autism and because a family member has still not had a proper assessment after 15 years. Families need action now and they need resources, because provision is expensive for local councils and schools. It is expensive, but we have to be willing to pay for it. We will work with the Secretary of State to make his proposals into the finest piece of legislation in this policy area for a generation.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman; he has always been a champion for those with special educational needs and disabilities, not just in his constituency, but around the country. We have continued to provide funding for autism training and professional

development in schools and colleges throughout last year and this year. We provided a further £8.6 million to strengthen the participation of parents and young people, including those who are autistic. We are strengthening and promoting the pathways to employment. Supported internships have been a great programme—Premier Inn in my constituency does a brilliant job—with £18 million of investment over the spending review period to increase the number of those who are participating to 4,500 from about 2,500 at the moment.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): If we were to read through the SEND reforms in the Children and Families Act 2014 and the accompanying code of practice, we would see that that is a blueprint for the system that we all want. This review seeks to address the issues with the implementation of the Act and the code of practice. To that end, I suggest that the national standards, which I welcome, should be based around quality rather than a *de minimis* principle. On alternative provision, will my right hon. Friend say more about how he will use the excellence within alternative provision so that early intervention, which we want to see more of in mainstream schools, can work more effectively?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Of course, we considered very carefully the recommendations from the Timpson review in regard to our recommendations for the AP system and, from that review, we developed our ambitious programme of reforms. The Green Paper sets out how we will improve early intervention and quality AP and learn from what is happening around the country, whether that is in mainstream schools, such as in Dixons City Academy in Bradford, or in some of the excellent work and case studies from the Green Paper of specialist AP that makes a real difference when it is identified early, and the help can therefore be put in early.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I put on record my thanks to the Secretary of State for briefing me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) last week on today's Green Paper and yesterday's White Paper.

The Green Paper mentions that the SEND system is “bureaucratic and adversarial”, “not equally accessible”, and takes a

“heavy emotional—and sometimes financial—”

toll on parents. Parents in my constituency would very much identify with that. People have been waiting three long years for this Green Paper, which is a welcome step forward, but parents, school staff and children alike are dismayed that there will be a further 13-week consultation, with legislation some time after that. The Secretary of State has said that the review has been shaped by parents and teachers, so when will parents in Twickenham and across the country see the impact of the changes?

Nadhim Zahawi: It was good to brief the hon. Lady and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton. The Green Paper has had a warm welcome from the unions the Association of School and College Leaders and the National Association of Head Teachers, with some challenges around implementation and how we do this well on the ground from the Local Government Association. Our work in early years and post-16 education has also been welcomed.

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

The hon. Lady asks when people will see the difference. The reason why I went to the Chancellor during the spending review and got the £2.6 billion, the additional £1 billion and the safety valve money is that I do not think we can wait until we have a consultation and get to a place where the whole Green Paper is a reality on the ground. That is why we are today announcing £1.4 billion—the first tranche of the £2.6 billion—for up to 40 new settings, which will see additional provision going into the system so that parents have the confidence that the provision will be there for their child.¹ However, she is right: this has been a long time coming, and I will make sure that we move at pace on the further reforms that are outlined in the Green Paper.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, which builds on the work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) and others in the Children and Families Act, in which I know the Secretary of State took a close interest when he was Children and Families Minister. However, is not the key point that without health in the room, everything falls down? Despite the best attempts to make that happen under EHCPs, that has not been happening enough, so I welcome statutory provision. Is not the other test that if the Secretary of State achieves anything, it must be a reduction in school exclusions? Too many young people with vulnerabilities and susceptibilities are exploited and end up in the system that I stewarded for a number of years. Can he make this as much an issue of justice as it is of education and health?

Nadhim Zahawi: I know that my right hon. and learned Friend is passionate about this issue. It is important to remind ourselves that the co-signatories on today's Green Paper are myself and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and his ministerial team is here on the Front Bench with us. His pledge is that health will look at the local provision and local resources, and of course, we will publish the dashboard. I spoke about data and transparency, and the best way to reform complex systems is through data and transparency. However, we are going further by simplifying the EHCP process, because there is no consistency in that. That also needs to be identified and dealt with, and we will do that. My right hon. and learned Friend is also right to point out that we need to ensure that every school—this is what my schools White Paper dealt with yesterday—is a great SEND school, because we have an equal ambition for children with special educational needs and disabilities as for all the children in our school system.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I wonder whether the Secretary of State is slightly divorced from reality and is seeing the school system for what he wishes it was, rather than what it is. In many schools, SENCOs are also full-time teachers, deputy heads, subject leads and, often, the safeguarding leads in their schools. Although the additional training and qualification is welcome, if the SENCOs do not have the time, they are not able to do justice to the role in the way it deserves. Where is the additional funding, resourcing and support to give SENCOs the time to focus as much as they need to on that crucial role?

1. [Official Report, 31 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 7MC.]

Nadhim Zahawi: I respectfully remind the hon. Lady that, in my opening remarks, I mentioned that, in early years, up to 5,000 new SENCOs will go into the school system to be able to do that work, and there is the support that we are putting in, including the £7 billion that is going into the school system, the £5 billion for recovery and the £2.6 billion in certain places. I also remind the House that change and change management are difficult. One area that I looked at, where we perhaps fell over in implementing the very good reforms that were introduced with the EHCPs, is how we deliver that change. I have £70 million going into change management to ensure that we have the resources in place, and I am confident that we can do this well.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I welcome the statement, and I have two points to make. First, the fight—time and again, parents talk about the fight that they have had to have with the system. Will the Secretary of State explain how these changes will bring transparency? Secondly, he mentioned that we cannot wait for the Green Paper process to finish, and I have read that he would like to build a further tranche of new special and alternative provision free schools. When will that take place and when can Leicestershire have its fair share?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The changes that I spoke about include the single national integrated SEND and AP system; excellent provision from early years to adulthood; building an inclusive system; a single integrated vision for AP; setting out clear roles and responsibilities; and accountability, because the fight begins when parents are confused, when they do not know who is accountable or where to go, and they feel alone. That is not the way it will be, because they will be able to see—we will co-create this with the sector—what they should be entitled to anywhere in the country. I will wipe out the postcode lottery, which is part of the issue relating to the fight, and set out plans to support effective implementation. One of the lessons that I learned in vaccine deployment is that however ambitious we are, if we do not have the team and have not thought through how we are going to succeed on the ground operationally, we will fall over, and I promise to think that through.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, but as Members across the House have highlighted, this is an issue right across the country. I am contacted about it by Vauxhall parents, carers and teachers on an almost weekly basis. Just two weeks ago, a constituent contacted me about his two sons, who are 10 and 12 and have muscular dystrophy, physical disabilities and autism. They have been waiting for over 12 weeks to get support from the local authority. Many local authorities such as Lambeth are without funding.

The Secretary of State outlined in his statement that he is launching a consultation and wants the very same families, teachers and carers to engage with him. Does he appreciate that they are tired? I do not think that they have the energy to engage in yet another consultation, because they are still trying to provide a service for the very children we want to see flourish. How is the Secretary of State confident that he will get the right views to make sure that this works?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who I know is passionate about the issue and whose constituency I have promised to visit. She is absolutely right that parents are tired. My promise to them is that what we are doing here, and the consultation, mean that we will get this right—and get it right with them.

I urge the hon. Lady's local authority to look around. Areas in London such as Barnet and Islington are doing incredibly well in local provision and in the ability to co-create with families what they need. Where the hon. Lady has a point is that that is not uniformly delivered across the country. That is what the Green Paper will do, but we are not waiting for it: in the meantime, we are investing £2.6 billion in thousands of additional places, both specialist and mainstream.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con): Publishing this Green Paper within six months of his taking office as Secretary of State demonstrates, alongside the resources that he won in the spending review, my right hon. Friend's drive and determination in this critical area. I welcome the Green Paper's focus on early identification of neurodiverse conditions and on the need for more initial teacher training, continuous professional development and support, but will he confirm that he believes that to get that early identification we need universal screening to get the data? It is only by basing decisions on data as well as on teacher observation that we can get the early identification that is so critical and is at the heart of the new Green Paper.

Nadhim Zahawi: My right hon. Friend and I share a passion for data and transparency. I know that he is looking at the evidence of what really works in the early identification of and screening for dyslexia, about which he is passionate.

The Green Paper is about a whole system review and, together with yesterday's White Paper and our parent pledge that teachers will identify the gaps in English language, reading and writing and share them with parents, it is our greatest lever to begin to look at how we do this well. I am looking forward to working with my right hon. Friend on the evidence of best practice around the world.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The request for diagnosis of special educational needs is the beginning of a long battle for far too many families. Local authorities with stretched resources are often pushing in the opposite direction; parents can wait years for EHCPs, and requests for specific schools are often denied by local authorities for financial reasons. That all points to the need for independent advocacy from the very beginning for parents of children with special educational needs. We cannot assume that every parent starts with the same capacity to deal with the minefield of taking their child through EHCPs, and requests for support in the classroom and other support with educational needs. Will the Secretary of State commit to creating an independent advocacy service that supports parents from the very beginning and holds their hand all the way through the process?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's thoughtful question, which the Chair of the Education Committee also raised. Essentially, the Green Paper will make sure that we hold local authorities to account through the new funding agreements, through the local inclusion dashboard, which will provide transparency

so that people can see how areas are performing locally, and through the new area inspection. As well as making sure that we do as the Minister for Children and Families did with the written statement of action in Birmingham, we want to learn from the best. Manchester is doing well; Dixons City Academy in Bradford is an excellent example of how this works well; Passmores Academy, a mainstream academy in Harlow, is doing incredible work. We learn from the best and scale it across the system.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his commitment to ensure that every child with SEND has the best opportunities and chances in education. Does he agree that many of those children's needs are met well in mainstream schools by SENCOs and family support workers, but we have to go further and faster to ensure that every teacher has the opportunity, the skills, the support and everything they need to be brilliant teachers of all children with special educational needs?

Nadhim Zahawi: I could not have put it better myself—my hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our proposals include the national professional qualification, up to 5,000 SENCOs in early years, and getting early identification in place. The schools White Paper and the parent pledge will also drive the thirst for knowledge to ensure that every teacher is confident in identifying the needs of their students.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): While this is a welcome move, I think that there is an issue with the maths. It does not seem that much newer money is coming in as a result of the Secretary of State's announcement today. We know that there is an in-built cost to supporting our young people, so perhaps he could be very specific about the money for SENCOs and particularly for one-to-one support workers. Will more one-to-one support workers be recruited? They are critical for many children in making sure that their EHCP is properly implemented.

Nadhim Zahawi: I know that the hon. Lady is passionate about maths. She will know that over the past three years the overall budget has risen by 40% to £9.1 billion—a pretty big increase. She talks about SENCOs; today we have announced training for up to 5,000 more SENCOs in early years. The important thing to remember is that much of what is in the Green Paper has been produced through consultation with those in the system, with parents and with practitioners. All I ask is that colleagues read it carefully and engage with us on the consultation. It is a true consultation, because I want to get this right.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. Having been a special adviser in the Department when the SEND review was launched, I remember it well. I am really glad that the public consultation is happening. It has also been great to see extra funding in the past couple of years.

I recently visited Villa Real School, a special school in my constituency. One issue that the school faces is that it was built for a smaller number of pupils than it now has because of the rising need for special school places. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the school? Will he also look at the capital building

[Mr Richard Holden]

programme? It is essential that as part of the review we deliver the places needed for children in the environment they wish to be educated in.

Nadhim Zahawi: I will happily meet my hon. Friend. Today, we announced the first tranche of £1.4 billion out of £2.6 billion for up to 40 specialist and AP settings.¹

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Parents and carers find it extremely stressful when there is a lack of school places, and a lack of choice of places, for children with special educational needs. In the meantime, it is the children who really suffer. It has been brought again to my attention that the exclusion rate for children with SEND is disproportionately high. That is just not acceptable. Can the Secretary of State say how that will be addressed in his review and what he will do?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady's final point is absolutely right. The plans for supporting parents will lead to much greater transparency and improved choice through more local inclusive mainstream provision. The combination of the schools White Paper, the Green Paper and the children's social care review that Josh MacAlister is carrying out for me will allow me for the first time, working with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, to knit together a system that really delivers for parents and delivers clarity on what they should be getting for their child, wherever in England they live.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I am losing my voice—I apologise for that—but I wanted to contribute because these proposals are so important for parents in my constituency who have been battling for this, and also because our schools are so committed to children with special educational needs. I welcome the news that there is to be a new special school in Stroud.

Can my right hon. Friend confirm that he will work to eradicate the various financial penalties that schools suffer when they take on more SEND children? Some of them constitute very strange and up-front costs. Will he look into the way in which the league tables are communicated, to ensure that schools that are looking after children with more complex needs are not treated unfairly for doing so?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend for making it here today, and I am glad that her voice is holding up. I can absolutely reassure her. A couple of weeks ago, I visited Highfurlong SEN school in Blackpool, a brilliant specialist school which is doing incredible work. Some of the children there have end-of-life EHCPs. Some came in unable to walk and are now walking, and, of course, learning as well. We will learn from the best, but we also want to ensure that schools are not penalised for doing the right thing.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): A quick read through the Green Paper did not reveal much reference to higher education. I hope that that does not reflect a lack of ambition for these children. May I ask the Secretary of State specifically about the current procurement exercise relating to the disabled students allowance? How can he assure the House

that it will not lead to a loss of expertise and understanding of the equipment and services needs of disabled students?

Nadhim Zahawi: I hope to be able to write to the hon. Lady giving her those details about the Green Paper, but suffice it to say that we have tried to look not just at early years provision but at the whole system, including further and higher education. The increased investment in supported internships has worked very well. When I was Minister for Children and Families, I visited West London College, which was doing brilliant work with L'Oreal, and I spoke about my own constituency and the work that was being done there with Premier Inn. I want to see the number of enrolments rise from 2,250 to 4,500. Supported internships give young people a fulfilling career, and give employers great employees who are loyal and strongly committed to their businesses.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and his ministerial team for the emphasis that they place on this vital area. In Sevenoaks and Swanley—and in the rest of the country—EHCP referrals shot up during the pandemic, and the extra money will help greatly in that regard, but can the Secretary of State confirm that where backlogs remain he will consider providing extra resources, and that he will monitor the position centrally, so that I can go back and say to the families in my constituency that these agonising waits are over?

Nadhim Zahawi: Part of the reason why the Chancellor was so committed to this area and made £2.6 billion available—as well as the £1 billion that took the budget up to £9.1 billion—is that we knew we needed to put additional capacity into the system now, rather than waiting until after the consultation and the Green Paper. We are also providing £300 million for a “safety valve” to help local authorities with a deficit of about £1 billion.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I am not going to join in the festival of patting the Secretary of State on the back at this stage—

Nadhim Zahawi: I am disappointed.

Mike Amesbury: After 12 years of Conservative government, we are seeing what is almost a scorecard of failure. Nevertheless, I will give the Secretary of State and his team the benefit of the doubt. What guarantees can he give that, for instance, a child with dyslexia who requires specialist equipment will be given that equipment quickly, that it will be fully funded and that it will not be about ability to pay?

Nadhim Zahawi: The drive behind the Green Paper is to ensure that we deliver across the board for every child with dyslexia, dyspraxia or autism, and that the system is sustainable and works for both the family and the child. The national SEND and AP single system will enable parents to see what they will get if their child has dyslexia. That will, I hope, give them a much better experience than what they are having today—which, as we have heard from many Members, is a big fight.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Not surprisingly, there are some excellent proposals of real substance in the Green Paper. I think they will give people hope. I

1. [Official Report, 31 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 7MC.]

also think it important that the Secretary of State said people should not need to fight the system, but the truth is that, when it comes to access to child and adolescent mental health services in my area, people would love to be able to get hold of the system, let alone fight it. As a result, early diagnosis is often missing and children are falling further down the list, which means that the need for intervention becomes significantly more acute.

I am pleased to see that Health Ministers are present. The Government recently announced the My Planned Care website to keep patients up to date on their wait for NHS treatment. Many parents tell me that they are often instructed not even to ask about the wait that they face. Should not parity of esteem between physical and other conditions demand the inclusion of the wait for CAMHS on that site, not just so that parents can see what the national standard is, but so that they can see exactly where their child stands and how long they will have to wait?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his characteristically thoughtful and well-evidenced question. The Green Paper contains a commitment from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to local inclusion dashboards, providing transparency so that parents can see the position locally. It is all well and good having a national view, but parents want to know how they and their child, and the rest of the family, are affected. This transparency will mean reform of the system, and CAMHS delivering what parents and children really need. Early identification is important. The long wait is adding cost to the system in many ways, and disadvantaging children in doing so. The Health Secretary has also given a commitment that those in the health system will look at resources and provision to ensure that we deliver consistency throughout the country.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I know from my own experience how important it is to receive the right support at the right time, and I hope that when the Secretary of State is carrying out his consultation he will make a special effort to engage with parents and families of children who are blind and partially sighted. Surely, however, the purpose should be to ensure that we get the decision right in the first instance. We know that, in 95% of cases that go to tribunals, the finding is in favour of the parents. The Secretary of State referred to a new system of local dispute resolution through mediation, but how will adding a new process make the experience of families simpler?

Nadhim Zahawi: I know that the hon. Lady is a passionate champion for blind and partially sighted people. We will ensure that we consult them, as we have done already in formulating the Green Paper.

When things go wrong, parents will continue to have the right to redress. The proposals we have presented today are intended to resolve issues earlier. Parents will still be able to go to tribunals if they want to, but we are proposing to strengthen mediation overall so that we improve relationships locally and bring quick resolution. If we all agree that that early intervention is important, it is only right that we do this. We are of course consulting on mandatory mediation. There is evidence that all these measures work and that they improve the system, which is why I am launching the 13-week consultation.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I know from visits to primary schools in my constituency—and the Green Paper underlines this—that the most common special need that people have in respect of speech and language therapy is access. Given the importance of communication skills to young people's development, may I ask how the proposals in the Green Paper will improve access to those vital skills?

Nadhim Zahawi: As I have said, both yesterday and today, the combination of the schools White Paper and the parent pledge—whereby teachers identify gaps in reading, writing and speech and share that information with parents—will be the catalyst to ensure that early identification is working. Our work with the Department for Health and Social Care means we can create a system that, when it comes together, truly delivers for children and for parents.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I appreciate the Government's honesty when they talk about the vicious cycle of late intervention, low confidence and inefficient resource allocation. Sadly, that is very much the experience of my constituents who have needed to access these services, so I appreciate the ambition to try to get away from that. My concern is similar to that expressed by a couple of Conservative Back Benchers about the lack of detail on the interaction with the health service, particularly when it comes to tier 4 CAMHS children who are in real crisis. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give us that those children will be helped as part of this initiative?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady raises an important point. Part of my ambition and that of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is to ensure that we knit together a system that delivers both elements, and I hope that the standards will provide clear guidance on when a child or young person needs that EHCP. We are simplifying the EHCP process overall to ensure that we improve efficiency, make it frictionless if we can, and reduce waiting times, including through standardising and digitising the EHCPs. One thing parents have told me is that if they move address, they suddenly have to make themselves familiar with a whole other EHCP. The work with Health will, I hope, make a real difference.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): Last week my constituent Holly and the National Deaf Children's Society came to see me to discuss the need for better support for deaf children in school. In particular, they highlighted the incredible difference that their teacher of the deaf had made. Can my right hon. Friend outline how the Government will invest in teachers of the deaf, so that all deaf children can have more regular access to the brilliant support they provide?

Nadhim Zahawi: I know that my hon. Friend is a great champion of children who are deaf. When I was Children and Families Minister, I saw at first hand the incredible work that the stakeholders and charities do in this area. I want to see best practice, and we will ensure that we learn from the best and see how we can scale this up throughout the whole school system. The White Paper and the Green Paper will give us the opportunity to knit together a system that delivers for deaf children in our education system.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The success rate for parents at appeal is indicative of a system that is completely broken. Of course, parents should not have to go to appeal to get the education that their children deserve, and they should not feel that they have to fight every step of the way, so I hope that what the Secretary of State has announced today will begin to change that. I want to ask about getting children to school in the first place. The Secretary of State will be aware of reports over the weekend of a real crisis in special educational needs transport because of rising fuel prices. What will he do to address that issue?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the success rate at tribunals is symptomatic of a system that is failing, which is why this Green Paper is long overdue, as I said earlier. We are keeping a close eye on school budgets, because energy prices are volatile and transport costs are going up because of energy costs. Energy costs are about 1.4% or 1.5% of the budget—the big spend is obviously on wages—but nevertheless, if energy costs are going up by 100%, that will put on additional pressure, so I will keep that closely under review and ensure that we work with the schools system. We have the £7 billion funding, of which £4 billion is front-loaded for this year and next, but I assure him that I will keep a close eye on this.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): As another dyspraxic Member of Parliament, I wholeheartedly thank the Secretary of State for his excellent Green Paper today. My constituency has many excellent mainstream schools, and also specialist schools such as St Giles in Retford. When parents choose a school for their children, they generally look not only at reviews from other parents but at the Ofsted reports. Can my right hon. Friend assure us that Ofsted will continue to play that key role in transparently assessing the performance of our schools, including SEND provision, so that parents can make an informed choice on what is right for them and their children?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend is a great champion of those who have dyspraxia, and he has real in-depth knowledge of the sector, as was discussed yesterday in the statement on the schools White Paper. He is right to say that Ofsted will continue, and from early years, all children will be taught a broad ambitious knowledge-rich curriculum and also have access to high-quality extracurricular activities. A school cannot be outstanding unless it is outstanding in its SEND provision as well.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The Secretary of State talked about the importance of early intervention, which many organisations that I work with, such as the Child Brain Injury Trust, are keen to ensure happens and that support is given. More generally, can he talk more about the local SEND partnerships and how parents can have a voice and a say in them?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. In that partnership, we are proposing to ensure that parents are an important part of the local SEND plan, as we have seen in the best co-created plans in those areas around the country that I mentioned earlier, such as North Tyneside and Manchester.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I am so grateful to my right hon. Friend for his work on this, and also to the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who is unable to be here in the Chamber today. Too many parents in my constituency come to me broken by the system. They are tired of fighting and particularly tired of going to court. How will the system help with those issues? Will my right hon. Friend also take into account the difficulties of provision in rural areas and in small unitary councils, for which this can be a heavy and difficult cross to bear?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend speaks with passion and probably pain from having to console those parents who have fought and feel that they are sometimes let down by the system. We have to ensure that the system works equally well in rural areas. Lincolnshire, for example, co-created the local system. It brought families and stakeholders in and said, “Look, we have got £50 million. How should we spend that to make sure the provision is the best we can make it?”

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The Secretary of State has said that decisions about support are too often based on where a child lives and not on what they need. That is the problem facing children in St Albans and across Hertfordshire. The reason is that the Government’s flawed funding formula for SEND is based on historical spend, not current need. This has produced the problem that SEND people in Hertfordshire get only £549 per head, compared with the neighbouring authority of Buckinghamshire, where the figure is £823 per head. That is a whopping 50% more. I met one of the Secretary of State’s Ministers in December and he committed to look at the specific anomaly of Hertfordshire once the Green Paper was published. Now that it has been published, will the Secretary of State confirm that his Department will look at this specific issue in Hertfordshire, and will he write to me in the coming weeks to outline what steps the Department is taking to tackle this anomaly?

Nadhim Zahawi: Yes, I will write to the hon. Lady. I also want to remind the House that the national funding formula is where we are moving to, to ensure that there is fairness in the system for all schools, including special schools.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Having the right support in the right place at the right time is undoubtedly the correct approach to this. As part of the welcome consultation that my right hon. Friend has announced, will he ensure that his Department reaches out to charitable and private sector providers such as Autism Early Support at the Circle Centre in Middle Claydon in my constituency, not just to look through the lens of the excellence in provision that they supply, but to learn about the challenges, particularly in getting the right support to children in rural communities, who often have to travel considerable distances to get the SEND support they need?

Nadhim Zahawi: I can certainly give my hon. Friend the assurance that we will reach out to them.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Parents are battling and children are struggling every day in York, in that tug of war between the services, the available funding and the available practitioners. I was

disappointed that the proposals do not contain a workforce plan covering the comprehensive range of services needed, including speech and language therapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, psychological services and CAMHS. In the consultation, can the Secretary of State put a focus on workforce planning and ensure that at the end of that consultation, a workforce plan is published alongside the Government response?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's characteristically thoughtful question. We made a commitment in the Green Paper, and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has also made this commitment, to ensure the workforce provision is adequate. The best way to ensure that is through the transparency of a local data dashboard so people can see their child has consistency of support.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): The Green Paper highlights that many families find the current system bureaucratic and adversarial, which is exactly what I hear from incredibly frustrated local parents in Aylesbury. Can my right hon. Friend tell me how local parents can feel absolutely confident that these proposals will mean that everyone, whether in the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education or the local authority, is genuinely working together to secure one and the same thing: the best provision for children with SEND?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend for his thoughtful question. He is right that we intend to make a number of changes after consultation on the Green Paper, whether it is a national system so that parents can see exactly what provision they should be getting so that their area is consistent with every other postcode in the country, or whether it is a local plan co-produced with all stakeholders around the table—including parents—a local dashboard and consistency on EHCPs. In many ways, it is frustrating when parents say, "My plan and this person's plan are completely different." There should be consistency across the board to make the system as frictionless as possible for parents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his positive statement. Covid-19 has been a big burden on pupils, and especially pupils with SEND. It is estimated that 25% of children are in that category. Our education system is incredible, but today's statement is only the first step. Will the Secretary of State give a confirmed date for a review of the money put in to achieve the goal of giving that extra bit of help and, if necessary, a different way of working and delivering? Will the extra moneys, £2.6 billion plus £1 billion, be subject to the Barnett formula?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his excellent question. He is right to say this is the first step. I can come to the House to share this Green Paper, but

we have to make sure the consultation is delivered, and then we have to ensure the implementation is in place. I asked the Treasury for £70 million to support the implementation. When I look back at the lessons learned, we fell over because there was little money for the implementation to happen well. Of course, Barnett applies to the Chancellor's announcement on the spending review in the usual way.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and particularly his reference to ensuring children are educated closer to home. The Chairman of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), referenced how his education was interrupted because of the constant treatment he required. Many young people go through that, and they reach the end of their compulsory education without achieving all that they could have achieved. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State assure me that resources will be made available for them to catch up and to achieve all that they could achieve?

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly can. We are putting the best part of £5 billion into recovery.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The prize for perseverance and patience goes to Holly Mumby-Croft.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I recently visited St Hugh's, an outstanding special school in my constituency. I was shown around by Thomas and Spencer, and I was incredibly impressed by both of them—they made a big impression on me. They are brilliant tour guides, and I hope to pay them back by giving them a tour of this place as soon as it can be arranged. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State join me in thanking the staff and teachers at schools such as St Hugh's for the brilliant work they are already doing, alongside the Government, to support our great young people like Thomas and Spencer?

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly join my hon. Friend in thanking them. They go above and beyond. It has not been easy over the past couple of years, when they have had to deal with a global pandemic and, of course, deliver care and education for these children. I express my heartfelt thanks and gratitude for everything they do, and of course for everything this sector does across the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That concludes the statement. I thank the Secretary of State for answering so many questions so thoroughly.

Covid-19 Vaccine Damage Payments

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

1.45 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to improve the diagnosis and treatment of persons who have suffered or continue to suffer ill effects from Covid-19 vaccines; to make provision about financial assistance to persons who have suffered disablement following vaccination against Covid-19 and to the next of kin of persons who have died shortly after vaccination against Covid-19; to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the merits of a no-fault compensation scheme to provide such financial assistance, on whether there should be any upper limit on the financial assistance available, on the criteria for eligibility and on whether payment should be made in all cases where there is no other reasonable cause for the death or disablement suffered; and for connected purposes.

This Bill is not about the tens of millions of people in the United Kingdom who have benefited from the vaccination programme; it is about the tens of thousands for whom the harm caused by the vaccines is greater than the benefit. The specific focus of this Bill is on the families of those who tragically died or suffered severe injury or life-changing conditions as a result of doing their public duty and being vaccinated.

The issue at stake is one of trust. To their credit, the Government recognised that some people might be adversely affected by the vaccines, so they extended the provisions of the Vaccine Damage Payments Act 1979 to enable those who suffer vaccine damage causing at least 60% disablement to receive an ex gratia lump-sum payment of £120,000.

The 1979 Act, however, is not working. No payments have yet been made under its provisions, even in respect of those whom a coroner's verdict found to have died because of the vaccine. The impatience and frustration of those so affected is now palpable. Having lost their loved ones more than a year ago, some have been badgering the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), for action—I am pleased to see her on the Front Bench. I understand that yesterday she blocked vaccine victims on her Twitter account, and today she closed her Twitter account completely. This is an indication of the strength of feeling among the public.

Experience shows that we need bespoke legislation to provide timely redress to those who suffered as a result of doing the right thing. Indeed, the Prime Minister was right to draw attention to this issue when, on 11 August 2021, he wrote to Kate Scott, whose husband Jamie, a fit 44-year-old software engineer, spent 124 days in hospital following severe brain injury caused by the vaccine. Jamie and his family are from Warwickshire, and I am delighted that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) is here to support the Bill. The Prime Minister said:

“You are not a statistic and must not be ignored.”

He went on to thank Kate Scott for her suggested changes to the vaccine damage payments scheme and promised that the Government would consider the case for reform. This Bill is my contribution to the Prime Minister's call for consideration of reform.

This Bill is not just about the payment process; it is also about diagnosis and treatment for those patients who have suffered or continue to suffer ill effects from the vaccines. The current situation is totally inadequate, which is why the Bill places a duty on the Secretary of State to improve both diagnosis and treatment.

Those who were in perfect health before their vaccine have encountered too much ignorance and scepticism when seeking medical help. For some, their general practitioner has refused to engage, to the extent that they are made to feel gaslighted, with their physical pain being dismissed or explained away as mental illness. How insulting and humiliating is that, and how at odds with the principles of the national health service?

The Bill also makes provision about financial assistance to those who have suffered disablement following vaccination against covid-19 and to the next of kin of those who have died. An ex gratia payment of £120,000 is available, but this has not been increased for 15 years and needs to be raised to £177,000 to keep up with inflation. Even that would fall far short of the compensation that should be available for the most serious life-limiting injuries, which is why the Bill calls on the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on whether there should be any upper limit at all. Other jurisdictions have taken the view that fully compensating those who do the right thing for public health reasons by having a vaccine should be looked after by the state if the consequences of having that vaccine result in disability or injury. That approach is taken in order to promote vaccine confidence among those who might otherwise be hesitant about having a vaccine. This Government's approach, however, seems to be to try to promote vaccine confidence by covering up the adverse consequences for some of having been vaccinated. The Secretary of State's report under this provision would also address the 60% disability threshold, which is a major constraint of the current system. Why should somebody who is 50% disabled as a result of vaccine damage be ineligible for any payment? Is there not a strong case for relating the payments made to the extent of the disability suffered? There is much public concern that the Government are going to use lack of proven causation as an excuse for not making payments under the scheme. Should the test therefore not be whether there is any other reasonable explanation for the disablement or death suffered?

The scale of this is enormous, and I do not think the Government have come to terms with that; more than 450,000 yellow cards have been submitted to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency detailing adverse reactions to covid-19 vaccines. That number is an underestimate of the actual number of people adversely affected, which may be 4.5 million or more. I adduce what the MHRA said on 17 May 2019:

“only 10% of serious reactions and between 2% and 4% of non-serious reactions are reported”

under the yellow card scheme. The MHRA says that those figures do not apply now, but it has not said what figures do.

This Bill cannot make progress on its own in this Session, as prorogation is set for 29 April, but it is and can be a catalyst for Government action. I welcome the agreement of the vaccines Minister to meet me on 19 April, and I look forward to that meeting. I also welcome very much the Secretary of State's promise to respond in writing in full to the points raised in my

Adjournment debate on 2 March. He promised to do that before the recess, but we have not yet had that response. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) is also yet to receive the outcome she was promised in that debate. I have also asked for answers to all my outstanding parliamentary questions, of which there are probably about a dozen. Today, at 12.55 pm, two were answered—they came in just as I was leaving my office. Picking up on just two of those answers shows how the Government are still in denial about the importance and extent of this issue. I was asking why the cases of people who have already been found to have died as a result of the vaccination cannot be processed automatically for the claims. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) said in her answer:

“The NHS Business Service Authority has requested that the relevant authorities provide medical records”.

But I also have correspondence here from somebody who directly corresponded with that authority and was informed that it was trying to get the Ministers to change their policy so that they could have a much less bureaucratic response. So we have a situation where the Minister is blaming the service authority and it is blaming the Minister, and the victims of these vaccine damage incidents are the ones suffering. Those victims are not going to go away and nor is this issue, and I hope that the Government are going to address it.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Sir Christopher Chope, Hannah Bardell, Mr Peter Bone, Miriam Cates, Philip Davies, Richard Drax, Esther McVey, Nigel Mills, Jim Shannon, Sir Desmond Swayne, Mr William Wragg and Jeremy Wright present the Bill.

Sir Christopher Chope accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May, and to be printed (Bill 295).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered.

That at this day's sitting:

(1) notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (1) (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), proceedings on the Motions (a) in the name of Secretary Dominic Raab relating to the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Delay in Expiry: Inquests, Courts and Tribunals, and Statutory Sick Pay) (England and Wales and Northern Ireland) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 362) and (b) in the name of Secretary Sajid Javid relating to the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Review of Temporary Provisions) (No. 4), shall be brought to a conclusion not later than 90 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this order; the Speaker shall then put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on those Motions forthwith;

(2) notwithstanding paragraph (2)(c)(i) of Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business), business in the name of the Leader of the Opposition may be entered upon at any hour and may be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours, proceedings shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and proceedings on these items of business may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Mark Spencer.*)

Civil Proceedings

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Motions 3 and 4 will be debated together. Under the terms of the Business of the House (Today) order, the Questions on the motions will be put separately, no later than 90 minutes after the start of this debate.

1.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): I beg to move,

That the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Delay in Expiry: Inquests, Courts and Tribunals, and Statutory Sick Pay) (England and Wales and Northern Ireland) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 362), dated 23 March 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 23 March, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motion on the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Review of Temporary Provisions) (No.4):

That the temporary provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 should not yet expire.

Maggie Throup: Throughout the pandemic, the Government have done everything in our power to protect the lives and livelihoods of people across the country. The Coronavirus Act has been a vital tool, allowing us to do that. Last week marks two years since the Act gained Royal Assent and the automatic expiry date for its temporary provisions. This is an opportunity to reflect on the progress we have made in our fight against covid-19 and on how the Act has supported us in that fight, as well as in encouraging important innovations in some of our public services, which we want to take forward.

First, I come to the support the Act has given us. It was an extraordinary piece of legislation for an extraordinary time in this country's history, giving us the powers we needed to keep the country safe, and the economy and public services open at the time of need. It helped us to bolster the health and social care workforce by suspending rules in the NHS pension schemes for England and Wales, and allowing the creation of temporary registers enabling recently retired NHS and social care staff to return to the workforce and play their part. Almost 15,000 nurses, midwives and, in England, nursing associates joined these temporary registers to help deal with the impact of the pandemic, as well as more than 10,000 paramedics, operating department practitioners and other professionals, and about 6,500 social workers.

The Act also helped the Government to offer unprecedented economic support and to help people and businesses at a time when so many businesses faced disruption. That includes the coronavirus job retention scheme, also known as furlough, which has supported 11.7 million jobs.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the Minister comment on the figures released by the Office for National Statistics today, which state that men and women living in the most deprived parts of the country were five and six times more likely to die from covid than those in the least deprived areas? What can she say about the adequacy of the regulations for those people?

Maggie Throup: It has been clear throughout the pandemic that people living in areas of deprivation and different ethnic minorities have been impacted more than others. We are committed to addressing that, which is why we will launch a health disparities White Paper shortly that will look at all the different issues.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Following on from the point that was just made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), the Minister must be aware of the massive effect of the whole coronavirus process on mental health, particularly among young people—even among children in primary school. Are the Government committed to putting the necessary resources into the hardest-hit communities where the mental health crisis is at its worst?

Maggie Throup: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. We know that the pandemic has had a mental health impact not just on children and young people, but on people of all ages. That is why it is important that we are now living with covid and getting our lives back to normal, which is one way of helping restore that normality that we are so desperate to get back to.

The Government helped businesses at a time when many faced disruption, including through the coronavirus job retention scheme. We have also supported the self-employment income support scheme, which paid out more than £28 billion to nearly 3 million self-employed people and was one of the most generous schemes for the self-employed in the world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The legislation covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Will the Minister reassure me that full consultation has taken place with the Health Minister and the Economy Minister in Northern Ireland to ensure that what she is mentioning is endorsed by the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Maggie Throup: I shall come shortly to the specific parts of the extension that are relevant to Northern Ireland. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that we have had ongoing conversations with the devolved Administrations throughout the whole two years.

The Coronavirus Act 2020 also helped to ease the burden on frontline staff in our critical public services. For example, provisions in the Act have helped the courts and tribunal system to keep functioning throughout the pandemic by allowing thousands of hearings to take place remotely.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister has now turned to the subject I wanted to ask her about. She talks about our courts, but the reality is that they are in a terrible position. We are up to a record 708 days for the average time it takes to prosecute suspected criminals. The longer those delays go on, the more victims wait. No party can seriously claim to be tough on crime while allowing victims to be left waiting and allowing criminals to spend 708 days before they are prosecuted. Will the Minister apologise to those people who are waiting and tell us that the Government have some kind of strategy to address that appalling record backlog?

Maggie Throup: I was about to come on to why we have tabled this statutory instrument today, but I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the backlog is now falling. The Ministry of Justice's spending review settlement has put £500 million into addressing the issue.

Currently, more than 11,000 hearings take place each week using remote technology across 3,200 virtual courtrooms. The Act has allowed the courts to deal promptly and safely with proceedings, avoiding unnecessary social contact and travel and keeping justice going while upholding the principle of open justice. That shows how the Act has not just offered support at a time of emergency but has driven modernisation of important services that we want to take forward. We are looking to replicate several of those powers in other primary legislation.

We have always said that we would not keep these measures in place for a day longer than needed. When the Act was introduced, the temporary provisions within it were given a two-year lifespan so that we could make sure that those powers would be in force only for as long as they were necessary and proportionate to respond to the pandemic. Since the Act was first introduced, we have made huge progress in our fight against the virus thanks to a national vaccination programme that has now put more than 140 million doses in arms.

The scientific protection that we have built up, together with our greater understanding of the virus, has shifted the odds. Our fight against the virus is not over, but our living with covid plan showed how we can now take a different approach, protecting ourselves without restricting our freedoms. To do that, we are moving away from legal curbs towards an approach based on personal responsibility and public health guidance where we trust people to take the right decision for those around them. As we have built up greater defences against the virus, we have been able to suspend or expire early more and more temporary provisions from the Act and the vast majority of temporary non-devolved provisions are now expired. Only five temporary non-devolved provisions remain in force and they would be extended by the regulations.

I will now set out the detail of the regulations. Four of the provisions relate to taking forward innovations in the justice system until we make them permanent by other means. Section 30 of the Act removes the obligation for coroners to hold inquests with a jury when covid-19 is suspected to be the cause of death. Subject to parliamentary approval, that will be made permanent in the spring through the Judicial Review and Courts Bill.

Sections 53 to 55 enable participation in court and tribunal hearings to take place remotely by video or audio links, which will be made permanent this summer through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. Again, that will be subject to parliamentary approval.

Covid has meant that a backlog of cases has built up in our justice system. Those provisions are helping courts to work more quickly through that backlog. They are therefore crucial to court recovery and it is vital that the powers are not allowed to lapse. A maximum six-month extension to those provisions in the Act is important to enable a smooth transition and avoid disruption to service before the primary legislation comes into force. The provisions will be expired once the new primary legislation is in place.

The regulations also extend section 43 of the Act on statutory sick pay in Northern Ireland for a period of six months. That enables the continuation of statutory sick pay to be paid from day one for absences related to covid-19 in Northern Ireland. Although statutory sick pay is a transferred matter in Northern Ireland, section 43 confers on the Secretary of State the power to make regulations in respect of Northern Ireland. As a result, the UK Government are asking for section 43 to be extended on the formal request of the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland.

I take this opportunity to note an addendum in the 12th two-monthly report on the Act, which was published on 24 March. It is regrettable that there was an omission of status updates for two temporary provisions in previous reports on the Act. Those are sections 42 and 43, which relate to provision of statutory sick pay and extend to Northern Ireland only. My Department apologises for the omission and welcomes the opportunity to correct it. The addendum provides information about the status of those provisions over the course of the pandemic. I reassure the House that the reporting omission has not had an impact on the policy relating to those provisions.

I thank hon. Members from all parties for the valuable scrutiny they have provided as we have debated the Act over the past two years. I am pleased to come before the House today with the vast majority of the temporary provisions in the Act having expired. That shows our commitment to removing powers that are no longer necessary, but also shows how far we have come since the Act was introduced.

Let me finish by thanking the health and care staff and all key workers who have worked so tirelessly throughout the pandemic as well as the British people for the extraordinary efforts they have made. The pandemic is not over, but we have made huge strides in our fight against the virus, which is why we can take these steps. I commend the regulations to the House.

2.10 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I start by echoing the Minister's thanks to healthcare and frontline public service workers and, indeed, the public for all they have done to get us to this point after two years of the pandemic. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the two motions before the House today on behalf of Her Majesty's loyal Opposition.

Clearly, as the shadow public health Minister, I will be focusing primarily on elements of the motions that relate to public health, but I will also touch on the extension of the justice provisions relating to coroners' inquests and remote hearings. I know my colleagues on the Bill Committees for the Judicial Review and Courts Bill and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill have already engaged constructively with the Government on those provisions and supported their being moved on to statute.

However, we have called for the Government to provide further evidence on the impact that those measures, particularly remote hearings, may have on people with disabilities and those who are digitally excluded. I would be grateful if the Minister reiterated those concerns to her colleagues in the Ministry of Justice—I notice the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) sitting alongside her—and urge them to put the appropriate safeguards

in place. With a Crown court backlog already at 60,000—caused, I may add, by the Government's short-sightedness and incompetence—we must ensure that inequality is not further entrenched in our justice system.

Moving on to public health, the Coronavirus Act 2020 was an unprecedented Act for unprecedented times. It enabled the Government to take rapid and wide-ranging steps to limit the spread of covid-19, and in turn to protect lives, livelihoods and our national health service. Correctly, it was never intended to last forever. Vaccination, as the Minister has said, has proved an invaluable tool in our fight against coronavirus, and it is thanks to our incredible scientists, our NHS staff and the British public that we are able to be here today to debate the end of many of the Act's provisions.

It is important to note, however, that covid has not gone anywhere—it is still very much here. It has certainly not gone anywhere for the 1.5 million people who are living with the symptoms of long covid, or the 800,000 clinically vulnerable and immunosuppressed people who continue to call on the Government for better clarity and access to antiviral and retroviral treatment. I would be grateful if, in her closing remarks, the Minister outlined what steps the Government will be taking to better support those communities, and when full guidance will be given on free testing provision. In three days' time, the general public will be unable to access free lateral flow tests, yet there is still no guidance on which groups will remain eligible for free testing.

Mr Perkins: On behalf of the numerous immunosuppressed people in Chesterfield and their families who have contacted me, I thank my hon. Friend for what he has just said. He is absolutely right that many of them still feel prisoners in their own home and feel utterly ignored, and the Government's failure on sick pay has only added to their sense of being forgotten. Will he reinforce the message to the Government that those people are not being properly catered for?

Andrew Gwynne: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. I have met numerous groups representing the clinically vulnerable, the clinically extremely vulnerable and the immunosuppressed communities, and the level of anxiety and worry in those communities is clear. While we have all, to some extent, been able to get back to as near a normal life as possible, those communities still feel isolated, under pressure and incredibly concerned about what mixing and social interaction would mean for them, were they to get coronavirus.

Debbie Abrahams: On top of those groups, which my hon. Friend is right to mention, there are also family carers, who are concerned that they may be prevented from having access to their family members in care homes without adequate testing, which they will be forced to pay for if it is not clear that they are included in the free testing.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Many of the people who are classed as clinically vulnerable, clinically extremely vulnerable or immunosuppressed are looked after by members of the family or friends who will come into the house to look after them, rather than by paid carers. Were free lateral flow testing to be extended at least to the CV, CEV and IS communities—not for those people themselves, but for the people coming

[*Andrew Gwynne*]

in to communicate and interact with them—it would at least give them some degree of confidence that coronavirus is not being brought through the front door.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I reiterate what my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) have said about the immunosuppressed community and the most vulnerable. I too have had numerous emails from those who are very concerned about the direction of travel. The lack of access to lateral flow tests is particularly concerning, not only for those people, but for those they come into contact with. My general practitioner has spoken to me about his concerns about antivirals. Does my hon. Friend agree that the limited cohort to whom antivirals are available is very small? My GP and I are concerned that the Government are missing a trick on this one: allowing GPs to prescribe antivirals where they think it is essential might help massively to keep people out of hospital.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend hits on an important point for debate at some stage in the near future. There is a concern that the cohort that has been drawn up for access to antivirals is not as wide as it could be, and certainly not as wide as in other European countries. We must also think about how we provide the maximum level of confidence to those communities.

For me, an ideal package to protect the immunosuppressed and clinically vulnerable would be the availability of free lateral flow tests for people coming to visit those who are clinically vulnerable or immunosuppressed, a drug such as Evusheld that would give at least 70% confidence—similar to the efficacy of the vaccine—to those people who are not able to be protected by the vaccine, and then access to antivirals if they become symptomatic.

I have asked the Minister on a number of occasions when we can expect information on the eligibility for free testing and have not even received an approximate date for when it will be published. That is totally unacceptable. We urgently need that clarity, given that we are three days away.

I draw colleagues' attention to the provisions in the motions relating to sick pay that are set to expire. Here in the United Kingdom, we have one of the worst levels of sick pay in the OECD. Statutory sick pay currently sits at just £96.35; that, I am afraid, is shameful. I could not live on that and feed my family, and I am not sure the Minister could either. The 2 million low-paid workers who earn less than the lower earnings limit of £120 receive nothing. That is before we consider self-employed people, who continue to remain ineligible for statutory sick pay. Self-employed people were badly let down over the course of the pandemic. A recent study by the Community trade union shows that a majority of self-employed people were rejected from vital covid isolation support payments. In suspending the temporary provision that allowed workers to receive statutory sick pay from the first day of their illness, the Government are stubbornly sticking to their regressive attitude to sick pay, which will continue to have a lasting negative impact on public health.

In recent remarks, the Prime Minister urged the public to exercise “restraint and responsibility” to avoid spreading the virus. This Government love to lecture us

on personal responsibility while also pricing people out of making the right decisions. We should not be forcing people to choose between putting food on the table or infecting their colleagues. As well as being morally reprehensible, the sorry state of sick pay in this country will lead to more workers getting sick, leading to worse public health outcomes and, in the long term, costing the country far more in reduced productivity.

Jeremy Corbyn: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about rates of sick pay. Is he aware that the levels of poverty since the end of the pandemic are increasing, that access to food banks is in greater demand than ever before, and that statutory sick pay often leads people to take serious risks because they have no alternative but to go out and try to work, even though they may well be displaying symptoms, in order to feed themselves and their families? That is a disgraceful situation in this country, and it can be dealt with by having a proper system of decent statutory sick pay as every other European country does.

Andrew Gwynne: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, for too many people in this country, that is the reality of their day-to-day living—and we know that it is going to get worse. I should remind the Government that we are in the middle of a cost of living crisis, although I appreciate that they may not have realised that given the Chancellor's spring statement last week and his inexplicable decision to clobber working people with the highest tax burden in 70 years. Inflation is at a 30-year high, energy prices are sky-rocketing, and we are facing the biggest drop in living standards since the 1950s. I really do fear that, as my right hon. Friend said, more and more people will be drawn into levels of poverty that we have not seen in this country for a very long time.

This is completely the wrong time for the Government to remove provisions that give people the financial support to self-isolate while also ending free tests. Surely the Minister cannot continue to defend this patently self-defeating policy. If people cannot afford to test and they cannot afford to self-isolate, what does the Minister think will happen? Do the Government think that covid will magically vanish? Of course it will not. Living with covid does not mean ignoring the fact that it exists. It does not mean turning back the clock to 2019 and forgetting that the pandemic ever happened. The pandemic happened, covid is here, and for too many people covid will still be an issue going forward.

In terms of living with covid, only Labour has set out a proper plan that would prepare us for new variants while securing our lives, livelihoods, and liberties. We would prioritise testing and make it fit for the future, fix sick pay, and learn the lessons of the pandemic. The Conservatives' plan is to repeat the phrase “personal responsibility” over and over again, and hope that no one notices that there actually is no plan. We cannot simply turn back the clock and pretend that covid never happened.

Mr Perkins: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Does he, like me, feel that the term “personal responsibility” would be slightly less nauseating if it did not come from a Prime Minister in Downing Street where 20 people are today receiving fines from the police for their failure to display any kind of personal responsibility while demanding it from some of the poorest people in the country?

Andrew Gwynne: It does stick in the throat a little hearing “personal responsibility” regurgitated time and again when we now know what happened in Downing Street, that the rules were broken and that the laws made in this House were broken. *[Interruption.]* The Minister says, “We don’t know that”, but we do, because 20 people have just received fines, and that means the law was broken.

We must not simply turn the clock back and pretend that covid never happened. Over the past two years we have seen the impact of painfully inadequate sick pay, and we have seen the benefits of access to free testing. We must learn from both those things. We have also lost more than 160,000 citizens in the course of this pandemic. I fear that, although the numbers are much smaller than they were, that toll will rise day on day, week on week, and year on year. We have real lessons to learn.

Debbie Abrahams: We would also make sure that we fulfilled our commitment to the international community on providing the vaccinations that it needs. There are still more than 2 billion people who are unvaccinated, and that will accelerate the risk of new variants that may be even more lethal.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Although we will continue to hold this Government to account, we will not oppose these measures today. There are real questions about covid that have to be asked by us and answered by Ministers, because too many are still unanswered. We owe that to the families of those who did not survive the pandemic, and we owe it to the whole country that stood by the rules throughout thick and thin to get us to where we are today, even when some in Government were not doing that. It is time for the Government to get serious. It is time for the Government to treat the British public with the respect that they deserve. It is time for a proper plan to live with covid.

2.27 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I rise briefly to speak on these measures with regard to the coroners process and particularly the registration of deaths.

In my local authority of Bradford, some of the measures over the past two years have seen a significant reduction in the bureaucratic hurdles and red tape that people face in registering deaths. That includes a significant decrease in the delay between the death of an individual and their burial. Some may see that as trivial, but for those of the Muslim faith it is particularly important, as it is a key requirement for the recently deceased to be buried as soon as possible. I strongly believe that it would also be a good thing for those of all faiths as well as of no faith, because it enhances the dignity that is afforded to an individual after their passing; the deceased can be put to rest as soon as their relatives wish.

However, what the Government propose in this statutory instrument does not include the measures that we have seen over the past two years that have helped such a rapid turnaround. The SI does not include measures that allowed for deaths to be registered over the phone rather than solely in person, which is incredibly useful for the bereaved at a difficult time; measures that allowed the medical certificate of cause of death to be issued if the patient had been seen by a doctor within 28 days of their death rather than the previous 14 days; or measures

that allowed certificates to be issued on the same or next working day, overnight, at weekends, or on bank holidays. Following their expiry last week, these measures are no longer in force. As a result, families will begin to see longer wait times and greater difficulties in their relatives being released from mortuaries, which will understandably cause great distress.

The measures that the Government are extending today are essentially intended to clear a backlog in the legal system, but we must remember the backlogs elsewhere in the public sector, such as in GP surgeries and hospitals more broadly. That is a particular concern to bodies in Bradford such as the clinical commissioning groups, Bradford Council, NHS organisations and other partners, which all feel that the changes of the last two years have worked well to make the system more efficient and sympathetic, at a time of immense distress for families. While I fully understand the need for protections to be put in place, I implore the Minister to work with Health Ministers—I am also happy to work with the Minister to discuss this further—to see what can be done to ensure that the deceased can be released quickly.

Jeremy Corbyn: I endorse what my hon. Friend says. Can he think of any reason why regulations cannot be introduced now to ensure that the speedy turnaround of death certificates that has been achieved, which has been of great comfort to the Muslim and Jewish communities in Britain, can be introduced urgently, so that this process can continue without causing stress to families who, by tradition, want if at all possible to undertake a burial within 24 hours of death?

Imran Hussain: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which is the one I was coming to. I implore the Minister, because not only is this hugely important to our Muslim and Jewish communities; as I said earlier, dignity in death is important to those of all faiths and none. My right hon. Friend makes a valid point. This is an area where the Minister maybe has the power to work with us to bring something to the House that can secure cross-party support, in order to make a real difference and give people dignity in death. Again, I offer the Minister my support to work on this in all sincerity.

2.32 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I, too, put on record my enormous thanks to all the health and social care workers as well as the many unpaid carers—who have demonstrated extraordinary public service over the last couple of years, and also on a daily basis, day in day out—for the instances of love, care and medical attention for the thousands of people who have recovered, but also the 165,000 who did not.

Two years ago, in March 2020, the Liberal Democrats recognised the seriousness of the emergency. We worked constructively with the Government, along with other Opposition parties, to introduce this emergency legislation. In the course of time it became clear that some of the provisions were indeed necessary to tackle the impact of the pandemic, such as enabling the emergency registration of nurses and other healthcare workers, and allowing people to receive statutory sick pay. However, many of the powers in the 2020 Act have serious implications for people’s wellbeing and for their rights and freedoms, such as the relaxation of duties on local authorities to

[Daisy Cooper]

assess and meet people's care needs, the extra powers for police and immigration officers to detain people, and the powers to restrict or ban events and gatherings.

This is the third time that the Act has come up for renewal. We are glad that the Government have retired many of the most controversial provisions. However, I ask the Minister whether the Department of Health and Social Care will work with the Cabinet Office to review the use of emergency legislation over the last couple of years, because we must not end up in this situation again. It is vital that we as a House ensure that there are safeguards in place to guard against the assumption that this or any future Government may use emergency legislation outside of an emergency.

Although the emergency legislation is effectively being retired bit by bit—we have just six months left—I share the concerns of a number of colleagues about the creeping complacency that has shown its face in the Department of Health and Social Care, particularly towards some of our most vulnerable residents, the immunocompromised. Other colleagues have talked about the importance of free covid tests, clear guidance and sick pay. The Government have talked very much about taking a vaccine-led approach, yet they are falling down in that approach when it comes to the immunocompromised.

There is a life-saving drug, Evusheld, the trials for which have shown that it can reduce the chances of developing symptomatic covid-19 among immunocompromised patients by 77% after three months and 83% after six months. I ask every Member of the House to take a second to put themselves in the shoes of immunocompromised people. Two years ago, the Prime Minister wrote to every person in this country and asked them to stay at home. Those who are immunocompromised or immunosuppressed have never left. Many of them are still in lockdown. They cannot benefit from the vaccines that the rest of us have enjoyed. For them, the decision of whether to go back to work or just to the shops is a life or death decision. It is a huge health inequality in our country that all of us can benefit from vaccines but those who cannot are not being given access to this life-saving drug.

I therefore ask the Minister not only to respond to the point about how we deal with emergency legislation in future, but to confirm on record today that the Government intend to place an order for this drug, and to do so within days not weeks, because, now that it has approval from the European Medicines Agency, the window within which there is still manufacturing capacity and the UK can place an order is shrinking fast. Although it is vital that the legislation that we have used during the pandemic comes to an end slowly—in six months hopefully it will all be retired—many people are still living in lockdown because of covid, so I would ask the Minister to respond to those points.

2.37 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I want to speak briefly about the courts provisions. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), I do not have any particular issues—in fact, I welcome the recognition of the need to speed up the processes in court. However, we cannot discuss this

issue without stopping for a moment to recognise the hugely damaging impact of the current court delays on victims of crime and the extent to which they continue to be doubly punished: punished initially because of the offence against them and punished again when they are forced to wait months or even years for justice.

I have never heard such a self-congratulatory response from the Government as that given by the Minister, especially when we consider that their record, on both the death rate in the country and the economic consequences, pales in comparison with the performance of many European nations. However, Ministers stand there and talk about how wonderfully we did. When it comes to the courts, the reality, as victims in my constituency and those across the country know, is that although things got much worse during the pandemic, they were disastrous before that. They were disastrous because of the scale of court closures between 2010 and 2019, and because legal aid cuts meant that many people ended up representing themselves, which causes court cases to take much longer because those people do not have access to proper judicial advice. The court delays are leaving victims in our constituencies simply waiting and waiting to a totally unreasonable degree. We hear from the police that when victims are left waiting, the stress of that, and of being unable to put an end to their ordeal, often leads them to withdraw permission to go ahead with the case, and criminals get away with what they have done. Not only are victims waiting 708 days—the average time it takes to go from offence to completion of a case—in torment, but criminals are out on the street when they should be banged up, because of the failure of this Government. I welcome these temporary provisions, but there needs to be real acceptance of what is actually happening to victims.

I support what my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish and the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) said about Evusheld—a drug for those who are immunosuppressed. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that for many of them the last years have been a prison sentence. Somebody who I know and have been to football with over many years has not been to a game for two and a half years. I never thought he would miss a game, but he has not been along since the start of the pandemic. He feels trapped, and absolutely unable to do the things that he would like to. There needs to be progress on that.

I also support what my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) said about the need to investigate putting on a longer-term basis the welcome provisions that speed up the issuing of death certificates.

2.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): We have had an interesting debate on these important measures. I am grateful to all colleagues who have contributed. Like the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), I thank all the workers in the NHS, and in social care, who put in such a shift over the pandemic. As a Justice Minister, I would say the same about all those working in the courts, particularly the clerks and others who had to go into work in the spring of 2020, when there was fear across society about the consequences of working face to face with others. They did that to keep justice going, and we owe them a great debt.

The hon. Lady asked about emergency legislation. Of course we want to learn lessons from covid-19, and we continue to review the effectiveness of our legal framework, and the lessons learned from our response to covid-19, as part of our preparedness for future pandemics and other health emergencies.

The hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) movingly discussed an important subject that matters a great deal to him, and to his constituents, and I pay tribute to him for speaking up for his constituents. These are very important matters. I can confirm that the general register office measures on death registration have been replaced in permanent legislation, except for the provisions for telephone death registration. We are trying to identify a legislative vehicle through which to put those provisions in place.

There were a number of comments on the immunosuppressed. I understand the concerns on the subject; it is one that my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care take seriously. I remind colleagues that those who are immunosuppressed are eligible for three primary vaccine doses and a booster, and will be called forward for a spring booster when appropriate. We made 5 million doses of antivirals available for the immunosuppressed.

Ms Lyn Brown: Does the Minister agree with my GP that expansion of the use of antivirals might be a necessary tool in our campaign to keep people safe, as we learn to live with covid?

James Cartlidge: I am a Justice Minister, but I am happy to pass on from my health colleagues that they keep that issue under review. The hon. Lady raised a point about tests; from 1 April, free tests will be available for those in certain groups most at risk from the virus. More details will be set out shortly; I cannot say more than that at this stage, I am afraid.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) is absolutely right—the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) made a similar point—that we went through matters relating to remote hearings in detail when the Judicial Review and Courts Bill was in Committee. That was my first Bill as a Minister. We went through in great detail the support for vulnerable users, but let me restate this for the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish: remote technology has a huge role to play in our courts, and we should not underestimate the extent to which its use kept justice going, which was very positive for vulnerable users. He is right, however, that there must be measures in place, and we have set them out in detail. Only recently, we awarded a new contract that provides for a technical support line to assist remote hearing users, and to enable them to access their hearing in the most appropriate fashion. Of course, the type of hearing held is always up to judicial discretion, and dependent on the circumstances.

On the point about the backlog, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish said—I address this to the hon. Member for Chesterfield, too—that we want to forget about the pandemic, but also that the backlog is entirely the result of Government incompetence. Let us be clear: before we went into lockdown, the backlog was smaller than when Labour was last in power. When we went into lockdown, the courts closed. The Crown Court's output collapsed. That should not be a surprise; we did not have jury trials because of social distancing.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), then Lord Chancellor, who has just emerged into the Chamber—he is probably out of sight to most Members—put in an extraordinary shift, together with the Lord Chief Justice and others in our courts, to get courts reopened, and to get jury trials going again in this country, but there was a consequence: a huge bottleneck of cases. That is why we had this record backlog. The good news is that the number of cases in the backlog is falling; it has gone from a peak of around 61,000 last June to around 59,000. However, we recognise that we have to go further, which is why court recovery is a priority for this Government.

The measures that we propose extending through the statutory instrument that is before us are helping to ensure that courts and tribunals have the resources necessary to deal with these outstanding cases. To be clear, sections 53 to 55 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 enable thousands of hearings to be conducted online—currently around 11,000 per week—so that courts and tribunals can be reserved for hearings, such as trials, that must be heard in court. Without section 30, the backlogs in our coroners courts would have been larger, which would have further increased the demand on local authority-funded coroner services. These temporary measures are in fact so important to court recovery that we intend to make them permanent, but we cannot afford any gap in provision while we wait for that legislation to complete its passage through Parliament. If courts were unable to continue to use these provisions, even for a few months, there would be a significant impact on our court recovery programme. That would mean defendants waiting longer than necessary for trial, more victims waiting longer than necessary for justice, and the bereaved waiting longer than necessary for inquests.

I express my thanks to all those who work in our courts for the sterling work that they did to keep the courts running during the pandemic. I hope that Members agree with me that, by extending the four provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 that are under consideration for a maximum of six months, we can continue to build on the progress that we have made in managing the virus, and in ensuring that our courts and tribunals can recover as quickly as possible from the effects of the pandemic. I reassure the House—this is crucial—that the four provisions will be expired under the Act once new legislation comes into force.

As was noted by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who has responsibility for vaccines, statutory sick pay is a transferred matter, and the Government are simply facilitating an extension of the provision relating to it, following a formal request by the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Delay in Expiry: Inquests, Courts and Tribunals, and Statutory Sick Pay) (England and Wales and Northern Ireland) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 362), dated 23 March 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 23 March, be approved.

CORONAVIRUS ACT 2020 (REVIEW OF TEMPORARY PROVISIONS) (NO. 4)

Resolved,

That the temporary provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 should not yet expire.—(*James Cartlidge.*)

Opposition Day

[18TH ALLOTTED DAY, FIRST PART]

Appointment of Lord Lebedev

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before we commence the debate, I have to say something about orderly language. As the House knows, reflections on the conduct of Members of either House may only be made on a substantive motion; this matter has been dealt with in points of order several times in recent weeks, so those who attend the Chamber regularly will be aware of that. The motion before us today is substantive, so there is greater leeway in what may be said than would otherwise be the case, but that does not mean that no rules apply at all. The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) looks disappointed.

The motion refers to concerns raised about the appropriateness of appointing Lord Lebedev to the House of Lords. Therefore, debate may cover those concerns. Members should bear in mind, however, that raising a concern is not the same as making unproven allegations about personal conduct.

In relation to the Prime Minister, his behaviour can be discussed in so far as it relates to the appointment of Lord Lebedev to the House of Lords. Again, Members should be cautious about making unproven allegations, but they can refer to concerns about the process. Even so, it is not in order to criticise the conduct of the Prime Minister in ways that do not relate to the substance of this motion.

Finally, as with all our proceedings, the precise context of what is said will influence the decision of the Chair in deciding what is orderly or not. I do sincerely hope that, as ever—and you have all heard Mr Speaker say this many times—in the words of Erskine May, “moderation and good temper” will characterise the debate we are about to have.

I know the right hon. Lady appreciates that, and I call Angela Rayner to move the motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

2.51 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I heard you loud and clear.

I beg to move,

That, given the concerns raised about the appropriateness of, and process for, appointing Lord Lebedev as a member of the House of Lords and the role of the Prime Minister in that process, an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty that she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House, no later than 28 April,

(a) any document held by the Cabinet Office or the Prime Minister’s Office containing or relating to advice from, or provided to, the House of Lords Appointments Commission concerning the appointment of Evgeny Alexandrovich Lebedev as a Member of the House of Lords; and

(b) the minutes of, submissions relevant to and electronic communications relating to, any meeting within the Cabinet Office or the Prime Minister’s Office at which the appointment of Lord Lebedev, or advice relating to that appointment, was discussed in a form which may contain redactions, but such redactions shall be solely for the purposes of national security.

May I start by noting the latest news from Ukraine? I know the whole House will be united in our outrage at the atrocities that have been reported, our deepest sympathy to the victims, and our ongoing support and our solidarity with the people of Ukraine. We will be united, too, in the message that we send to Putin. We will not waver in standing firm against his aggression, and the unity in this House reflects that in the country and among the constituents whom we represent.

It is all the more important, in that context, that we make sure that we do all we can to protect our country's security and our people's safety. This Government's ultimate responsibility to this House is to keep people safe, and it is all the more important that we stand up for the fundamental values of democracy in stark contrast to authoritarian regimes and dictatorships such as that in the Kremlin today. That is why we are here today—to defend our country's security and its democracy, and to hold our Government to the highest standards in doing the same.

Every Minister has a fundamental duty to protect the people of this country and to prioritise their safety above all else. We have tabled this motion because serious questions have been asked about whether the current Prime Minister upheld that duty to the standard that we would expect, and because those questions have not been answered with the transparency that we would expect.

We must get to the facts of the case. An investigation by *The Sunday Times* found that, on 17 March 2020, British intelligence warned the House of Lords Appointments Commission against granting a peerage to the Prime Minister's close friend, now the Lord Lebedev of Hampton and Siberia. The commission concluded it could not support his nomination. Forty-eight hours later, the Prime Minister visited Lebedev at his home in London. Details of that meeting have never been released to the public, and questions remain about whether the security services knew about this meeting, or whether their assessments show that the Kremlin was keeping tabs on these activities.

In July 2020, Lebedev's appointment as a peer was announced, so the question is this: what changed between the security warning and the appointment? The British public have a right to know if, and how, an individual of apparent concern to our intelligence services was granted a seat at the heart of Parliament by personal order of the Prime Minister, and whether the Prime Minister was aware of that security advice, but chose to ignore it, overrule it or even demand that it be changed.

This is not the first time concerns have been raised about Lebedev by the British security services. As long as a decade ago, Sir John Sawers, the head of MI6, made it clear that he did not deem Lebedev a suitable person to meet. It remains unclear if the Prime Minister—then Foreign Secretary—was made aware of these security concerns, but his deeply concerning links to Putin are well known. He has been open about them on Twitter, where he has promoted the worst conspiracy theories and defences of Vladimir Putin, and raised questions over the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, the Kremlin critic poisoned in a London hotel.

Lebedev's father and business partner is a former KGB spy turned billionaire oligarch, who continues to fill his coffers with investments in occupied Crimea and in Russian munitions. We have heard worrying reports about the existence of a private back channel between

our Prime Minister and President Putin, facilitated by Lebedev. Can the Minister shed light on this deeply concerning allegation and rule out the existence of such a back channel? As the bombing of Ukraine and the tragedy continue and the threat from Russia in the west intensifies, does the Minister think this appointment, in apparent opposition to the security services, was appropriate?

The Cabinet Office plays a central role in the vetting process of Lords appointments. In Lord Lebedev's case, Cabinet Office security officials were responsible for relaying the intelligence and guidance to the House of Lords Appointments Commission that formed the basis of its objections to his appointment. However, reports by *The Sunday Times* and a written statement by the then chief of staff to the Prime Minister allege that he "cut a deal" to provide the appointments commission with a "sanitised" version of the advice.

Could the Minister outline how, when and why the guidance changed after communication with the Prime Minister, and could he confirm whether the Cabinet Office had sight of security advice warnings against the appointment of Lord Lebedev? This is a matter of national security, and there can be no delay in getting transparency in this case. There are also serious questions about whether the Prime Minister put his personal interests before the public interest in this case. The Prime Minister's apparent cavalier disregard for those serious security warnings speaks to a wider culture at the heart of this Government where the rules do not apply when it comes to appointing friends and donors to public office.

If the Prime Minister himself is willing to overrule British intelligence agencies, this raises serious questions about appointments more generally, and specifically in the House of Lords. Appointments to the Lords should be made based on integrity and contribution to our country. They are not some free pass. They are not a golden ticket for Prime Ministers to grant to their mates, like a membership of some posh London boys club, or a way to say thanks to billionaire mates after years of wining and dining, and champagne receptions and holidaying, not to mention the favourable headlines. But seriously, appointment to this Parliament should be on the basis of dedication, integrity and contribution to public life in Britain.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Clearly, I represent a far-flung part of the United Kingdom, and there are good and hard-working citizens who give their entire working lives for such communities. In the past, this has been recognised by means of an honour—Order of the British Empire, British Empire Medal or whatever. Can I suggest to the right hon. Lady and to everyone in this place that the Lebedev peerage cheapens the whole system of honours and reduces its value to those people who genuinely deserve to be recognised in civil society?

Angela Rayner: Absolutely. I fully agree with the hon. Member's contribution. During the pandemic, we saw such dedication by our key workers, with doctors and nurses putting their lives on the line to save the lives of others.

Instead, we see reports that the Prime Minister parachuted his close friend Lord Lebedev into the heart of the UK's Parliament, a man with whom the Prime

[Angela Rayner]

Minister has enjoyed a decade-long courtship, which included a stay at the oligarch's castle in 2018, where he is reported to have attended a party over the course of a weekend, with all his flights and accommodation paid for by Lebedev. An investigation by *The Guardian* revealed that during his stay, the Prime Minister, who was then Foreign Secretary, is reported to have met Alexander Lebedev, the former KGB agent and father of Lord Lebedev. The party took place just days after the Prime Minister—then Foreign Secretary—attended a NATO meeting to discuss the response to the Salisbury poisoning, in which the nerve agent Novichok was used in an assassination attempt on the Skripals. Immediately following the meeting in which Putin's deadly attack on British soil was discussed, the Prime Minister reportedly ditched his security protection to attend the Lebedev party, where a former KGB agent was in attendance. The Prime Minister seems more interested in attending parties with his Russian billionaire mates than listening to the concerns of the British security services.

Culture is set from the top. Appointments matter. Politicians come and go, but Lord Lebedev will be a permanent fixture of our Parliament in the other place for decades. There is a serious precedent to be set in this case about how Parliament chooses to appoint those who represent us. It also raises serious questions about the relaxed vetting process of Lords appointments, creating a security risk at the heart of our democracy. This must be taken seriously, and for that reason I ask the Minister this: will there be a review of the House of Lords appointment process?

We must ensure that a robust vetting system is in place that safeguards our democracy and ensures transparency for the public. Indeed, the Lord Speaker recently called for a more rigorous appointment process for peers. We have a Prime Minister who appears willing to jeopardise the security of the British public for the sake of a personal friendship. The culture is set from the top, and in this case it raises much wider concerns about public appointments. It is time for the Prime Minister to come clean today about whether and why he interfered with British intelligence to award a peerage to his close personal friend. The full Cabinet Office guidance about a peerage for Mr Lebedev, which was mysteriously airbrushed, must now be published in the national interest. The Prime Minister claims that that advice cannot be published because it will undermine confidence in the appointments process. Well, it is a bit late for that. This is about his actions. He has run roughshod over the integrity of the process, and put his own interests before those of Britain.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I am sorry to intervene on my right hon. Friend and I hope speak later in the debate, but I thought she should be aware that since this debate started, Lord Lebedev has been tweeting furiously, implying the inappropriateness of this House to even have this debate. That from a Member of the other place is completely unacceptable and, if I may advise Lord Lebedev, extremely unwise.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): If what the right hon. Gentleman says is correct—I have no reason to doubt him although I have not seen the

content of the tweets—let me say that if it was inappropriate for any debate to be occurring in this Chamber, it would not be occurring.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Woe betide anyone who tells Madam Deputy Speaker what is or is not appropriate for debate in this Chamber.

By his actions the Prime Minister has run roughshod over the integrity of the process, and put his own interests before those of Britain. The suggestion that questions of suitability are for the Prime Minister alone will not cut it. When it is as clear as day that he so flagrantly disregarded advice and intervened in this process, I suggest that it is he who has undermined that process time and again.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way and apologise for interrupting her. Is it the Labour party's position that the House of Lords Appointments Commission should have a veto? Given that it is part of her shadow portfolio, I am keen to understand. She is talking about the Prime Minister's role in this, but does she believe that the House of Lords Appointments Commission should have that veto?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman makes a point, but the point I am making is that security advice was given, and the commission made a recommendation. If the Prime Minister overrides that advice, surely we should have a reason and transparency about why he went against the advice of the security services and the commission. That is very important and a robust way of dealing with things.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): According to allegations in *The Sunday Times*, the Prime Minister went to visit the now Lord Lebedev about the advice he had been given by security services, and to assure him that he wanted to give him this peerage, at a time when coronavirus was raging, businesses were being asked to close, and schools were about to be asked to shut. That was a priority for the Prime Minister when the rest of us were having to put our entire lives on hold. Does the right hon. Lady think that is an appropriate priority for the Prime Minister in the middle of a national and global crisis?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Lady makes a good point, and no, I do not think that is a good priority. I cannot get into concerns about what the Prime Minister thought was appropriate under his own lockdown rules during this debate, because it is not on the motion.

These dangerous links to Putin's oligarchs threaten our national security, but today we can take a step to defend it. There can be no better answer to the aggression of a dictator than to show that in a democracy, our leaders answer to the country they serve. The Minister should stop hiding behind the excuses and denials that we have heard about why we cannot have this transparency. I urge the House: let us get to the facts behind this whole murky business, publish the advice, and come clean with the British people. I commend the motion to the House.

3.6 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Let me first address the situation in Ukraine. President Volodymyr Zelensky has spoken of the Prime Minister and people of the United Kingdom as being among his greatest allies, and the Kremlin has spoken of the United Kingdom as a leading opponent. I am proud of that position, and we will continue to support Ukraine—as I know will the whole House—and the courageous people of that sovereign and independent country.

The motion before the House calls on the Government to release advice provided by or to the House of Lords Appointments Commission, and relevant communications thereto. The Government regret today's motion for any number of reasons—I will come on to those—but particularly because, for the first time in many decades, there is a war in Europe, and there are many pressing domestic concerns and issues. It is somewhat surprising that the Opposition have brought forward for discussion this afternoon an ad hominem attack on a single individual.

Although Parliament has unlimited power to call for papers, persons and records, historically the House has exercised restraint in the use of that power, and for good reason. That the motion seeks not to show restraint is, in my submission, unfortunate. I accept that Parliament has a vital scrutiny role and should use its power to facilitate it, but that does not extend to making use of the procedures of this place to single out an individual by making unsavoury and ad hominem attacks of the kind we have heard and will be hearing this afternoon.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Ellis: Before I give way, which I will be happy to do, may I gently point out to the Opposition that—and I say this in all candour—they ought to be careful of intolerant messaging? Not all Russians are our enemy. Many British citizens of Russian extraction came to this country with a view to an opposition to President Putin. People cancelling Tchaikovsky concerts is not appropriate, and Labour seeking to whip up anti-Russian feeling or casting all persons of Russian extraction in a negative light is wrong.

Furthermore, the disclosure of the information sought here today would undermine the very role of the House of Lords Appointments Commission. Labour is asking for something that would break the appointments process in the House of Lords. It would chip away at the careful vetting procedures and the exchange of information that necessarily has to be discreet.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Michael Ellis: If I may, I will just finish this thought.

Let us not forget that the commission of which we are speaking is independent, expert, advisory, and cross-party, with Labour, Liberal and Conservative members, and it was set up by Tony Blair and the Labour party in the year 2000—more than 20 years ago.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): On the Minister's point about Labour being Russophobic, I lived and worked in Russia for three years as director of the British Council in St Petersburg, and we worked every day with ordinary Russians—good people—who want

that country to be a normal country connected to the rest of the world. The people we are talking about today are not ordinary Russians. We are talking about a former KGB spy and the woman who was married to a former deputy Finance Minister who has given millions of pounds to the Conservative party. I humbly ask the Minister to withdraw the comment about Russophobia. We have no problem with the Russian people; we have a big problem with what he is talking about today.

Michael Ellis: No, I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman says. In fact, the noble Lord who is the subject of this debate is not a Conservative party donor and never has been, so the hon. Gentleman is quite wrong on all those fronts. The motion before the House today is what I have said it is.

Shaun Bailey: Further to the point of the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), I wonder whether my right hon. Friend and learned Friend could give me his thoughts on this tweet that has just come through, which contains this from the Leader of the Opposition:

“Congratulations on your elevation to the House of Lords. All best wishes, Keir”?

Is what is good for the goose good for the gander? What does the Minister think about that?

Michael Ellis: It has been mentioned that Lord Lebedev has been tweeting this afternoon, and I understand that he has tweeted in the past few minutes that the Leader of the Opposition congratulated him on his appointment as a peer. That must be rather embarrassing for the Labour party.

Matt Western: I sometimes think that the Minister must be the Derek Underwood of the Front Bench, in that he is the nightwatchman defending the indefensible.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) just said, we are clearly talking about someone with huge influence who has worked closely with the Prime Minister and collaborated in delivering certain election victories for him as the Mayor of London.

Michael Ellis: Lord Lebedev is a British citizen of Russian extraction who, I understand, had his primary and secondary education in this country. I see no logic in the Labour party's assessment.

In order to put this issue in its true context, it is necessary to remind hon. Members of the process for nominations for peerages. The power to confer a peerage, with the entitlement to sit in the House of Lords, is vested in Her Majesty the Queen and is exercised on the advice of the Prime Minister. It is a long-established feature of our constitutional arrangements. The Prime Minister is ultimately responsible to Parliament, as he is in all matters, and to the people of the country for any nominations he makes.

Two events have served to shape that process. First, the House of Lords Act 1999 ended the right of hereditary peers to pass membership of the other place down through their families. Secondly, the House of Lords Appointments Commission was created in May 2000—under Labour, which now wishes to break it—and it recommends individuals for appointment as non-party political life peers, such as those on the Cross Benches, and has political representation from the three parties within its members. The vetting process is at the heart of

[Michael Ellis]

its work. The commission seeks to ensure the highest standards of propriety, and I include party political nominees within that.

It does not apply in the instant case, but it should not be a matter of opprobrium that somebody be a party political supporter. Labour has hundreds of peers in the House of Lords. The Liberal Democrats have some 83 peers despite them having barely enough Members of Parliament to fill a minicab. There is nothing wrong with having a political affiliation.

The House of Lords Appointments Commission seeks advice from a number of sources during its deliberations. Any time we ask any independent advisory body to obtain advice, and it does so discreetly and in confidence, if we seek to break that process, said body will not be able to function. Once all the evidence has been considered, the commission will either advise the Prime Minister that it has no concerns about an appointment or will draw its concerns to the Prime Minister's attention. It is a long-standing position that it is for the Prime Minister of the day to recommend appointments to the House of Lords. For that reason, the Prime Minister continues to place great weight on the commission's careful and considered advice before making any recommendations. That arrangement has served successive Prime Ministers of both parties but, as in other areas, they must carefully balance a range of evidence.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way to a Liberal Democrat, few as we are. Nevertheless, I draw his attention to another tweet from Lord Lebedev:

"Openness and transparency are pillars of our democratic system, so I welcome the call for security advice about me...to be released. I have nothing to hide."

The Minister is highlighting the fact that the appointment was questioned by that commission, so I do not see his argument, because it sounds like there were concerns. If Lord Lebedev has nothing to hide and the commission made its recommendation, that prompts the question: what do the Government have to hide?

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Lady for asking that question. This is not about any one individual. The Opposition are seeking for it to be about one individual who cannot answer for himself in this House, which is wrong. The Government are seeking to protect the system, so even if Lord Lebedev has said that he does not mind, it is not, with the greatest respect, only about him; this is about protecting the system, because the House of Lords Appointments Commission would not be able to function.

The Leader of the Opposition wrote to the commission earlier this month and received a reply a week or two ago, which I believe is in the public domain, in which it outlined the process and did not highlight any problems. The reality is that the Government are seeking to protect a system that has worked well for 22 years, so I ask the House to bear that in mind.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The Minister has said that the House of Lords Appointments Commission takes a variety of information from a variety of sources and organisations. That is perfectly

reasonable. Is he suggesting, however, that the opinions or information of the intelligence services should somehow be of less importance than information from another body?

Michael Ellis: No, I am not suggesting anything of the sort. In fact, I have no personal knowledge of those from whom the commission obtains its information. It is for the commission, which has Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat and independent members, to make its own judgments, and we heard from the commission in the letter I mentioned, which I think was from Lord Bew.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): Quite rightly, we should be concerned about Russian money coming into our political system, but my right hon. and learned Friend at the Dispatch Box is right in what he says. We really should point out who the Prime Minister was who let the fox into the chicken coup. Who was it, for instance, in 2003 when Roman Abramovich bought Chelsea football club? It was none other than the new Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair.

Michael Ellis: Yes, well, I will leave the House to draw its own conclusions about that.

I have to say that the individual who is the subject of this debate is a British citizen. He happens to be of Russian extraction. I understand that he has been in this country since primary school age. It is important to emphasise that this is about British people whose ancestry and heritage should not be relevant. As the owner of a regional newspaper, I understand that the London *Evening Standard* has raised £300,000 for its Ukraine appeal, £3 million for its AIDSfree campaign, and £13 million for its Dispossessed fund for persons in poverty in London and the Grenfell tragedy. I think that is something to be applauded.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Let us just get this right: this Lord Lebedev is educated here at primary school and senior school, he does not donate to political parties, he donates to charities and he is a good citizen. That lot over there on the Opposition Benches do not want to be involved in democracy. Is it the case that they just do not like foreign names? [Interruption.]

Michael Ellis: Well, I will invite the House to draw its own conclusion. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I did say at the beginning that we must have good temper in this debate. Shouting at the Minister or anyone else does not help.

Shaun Bailey: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In a bit of chuntering from the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), she referred to this as the most xenophobic Conservative party. Can I just say to the hon. Lady that I am certainly not a xenophobe and I take real exception to that? I invite her to withdraw those comments. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Let me make this absolutely clear: nobody in this Chamber is calling anybody xenophobic. If anybody has used phrases like that, stop it now. I am not having it repeated. I am taking it that these things have not been said, because it would be

better if they have not. Now, let us keep this at the right level. There is no need for superlative insults to go from one side to the other.

Michael Ellis: To return to where I started, there are so many issues that affect people's lives that we could be debating today, for example: my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer's income tax cuts, the first in 16 years; the 5p cut in fuel duty; or my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary's plans to make sure that any child who falls behind in English or maths gets the support they need to get back on track. I find it surprising, at the very least, that the Opposition have chosen this particular motion, one that, at best, would compromise the ability of an independent body, which is respected for its independence, to fulfil its mandate simply to make a short-term political point. At worst, it would be negligent of the long-term consequences to the key role of the House of Lords in scrutinising the Executive and being a revising Chamber, and the valued expertise and specialist knowledge and experience of its Members.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I think lots of my colleagues would say that we have tabled the motion because it gets to the heart of who we are as a country and a democracy. Given the Prime Minister's long-term relationship with the Lebedev family, what does the Minister think it looks like not to have published the Intelligence and Security Committee report before the 2019 general election?

Michael Ellis: That is not relevant to this debate. I will tell the hon. Lady what this debate looks like: it looks like the Labour party is focusing on an individual because of who he is. It is doing so unfairly and improperly, and it is seeking to break a process. The reality, as we have heard, is that Labour Members have also supported this individual, socialised with him and sent him messages of support. There is nothing wrong with that. I do not criticise Labour Members if they have sent supportive text messages to Lord Lebedev. I do not criticise anyone in this House for doing so. As the owner of newspapers, no doubt he interacts with a large number of individuals, even though he is a Cross Bencher. What I criticise, and what I urge the House to exercise with considerable caution, is how it looks to attack an individual because of his heritage or because of his extraction. That is the key point.

The other key point to make here is that confidentiality in respect of the process ensures that it operates in the interests of the Labour party and the Conservative party, and that the process of appointing peers of this realm is a fair and dutiful one. The probity and the confidence of the system would be compromised if we broke it. If we said that henceforth we cannot ask people to send in confidence their opinions of individuals whom the Leader of the Opposition or the Conservative party have put forward for a peerage, anyone would know in future that if they wrote to the commission in confidence it could then be out in the public domain. They would not do it and that would damage the process. I would have thought that is rather obvious.

The Government believe that to ensure the ability of the commission to conduct robust vetting and to provide advice that is not compromised, the process should continue to be conducted confidentially, with disclosure at the discretion of the Prime Minister, who is ultimately

responsible for making recommendations to Her Majesty on appointments to the Lords, or of the commission, as a body independent of Government and responsible for the vetting of nominations.

Before I sit, I would like to address, if I may, the use today of the Humble Address procedure. The House itself has recognised the need for this process to be used responsibly. The Government response to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's 15th report said:

"The Government therefore agrees with PACAC that this device should not be used irresponsibly or over-used."

The Procedure Committee observed in its May 2019 report:

"The House, by its practice, has observed limitations on the power: it does not use the power to call for papers which Ministers do not have the authority to obtain, nor does it use it to obtain papers of a personal nature."

That is a fundamental point. Today's motion is a breach of that process. It demonstrates why the motion is unwise and irresponsible. Motions such as the one before us today crystallise the potential tension between the use of the Humble Address procedure and the responsibility of Ministers not to release information where disclosure would not be in the public interest. We have heard it said that the particular peer himself does not mind whether that information is released, but I submit that that is irrelevant. What we seek to do is protect the process, more than the individual, and that verifies that. The responsibility of Ministers, which I take very seriously, is carefully to balance and weigh up the need for the transparency and openness that we all try to achieve against the equally important, long-standing and competing principle in respect of data protection legislation, which the motion challenges. The Government reiterated, in our response to the Procedure Committee report, the principle of restraint and caution in recognition of the importance of ensuring that the wider public interest is protected.

Matt Western: I thank the Minister for giving way a second time; he is being generous. I am sure we all agree how critical transparency is to our democracy. Would that in part of the process there had been any transparency in the origin or source of Lord Lebedev's wealth, which is particularly pertinent today and has been for the past five weeks since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Minister may refer to a message texted to Lord Lebedev 18 months ago, but that was before the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Michael Ellis: Were the hon. Gentleman to look into the matter, he would find that Lord Lebedev has, through his newspapers, publicly criticised the Putin invasion of Ukraine, as one would expect him to do. He has done so on the record.

The motion provides a saving in respect of national security considerations, in that it would allow for the redaction of material

"for the purposes of national security."

For that reason, I shall not dwell on the national security considerations in depth. I remind the House that Ministers do not comment on national security issues; nevertheless, I stress that weighty public issues are in play that should not be treated lightly.

[Michael Ellis]

As I say, when we balance a commitment to transparency against the protection of information when disclosure is not in the public interest, national security is one consideration that the Government must weigh up. Rather than engage in insinuation and speculation—I am afraid that is what has been happening—in respect of matters of national security that must be handled with care and caution, I emphasise that it is and always will be Her Majesty's Government's absolute priority to protect the United Kingdom against foreign interference.

It is easy for those in the media or on the Opposition Benches to cast aspersions and invite people to draw assumptions. We cannot answer points about national security in detail, but I emphasise that we in the Government will always give absolute priority to the protection of the United Kingdom from foreign interference. As proof of that, I remind the House that, as announced in the Queen's Speech, we will introduce new legislation to provide the security services and law enforcement agencies with the tools they need to disrupt state threats.

In conclusion, the passing of the motion would have long-term and damaging consequences for the system of appointments to the peerage. It would breach the principles of confidentiality that underpin the process; impugn the reputation of an independent body and damage its ability to undertake its role; and impact on the right of individuals not to have their private lives splashed across the media at the whim of the Opposition Front-Bench team.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): If the motion is as potentially damaging as the Minister says it is, why will Government Members not vote against it this afternoon?

Michael Ellis: It is quite normal practice to ignore Opposition motions; they are given the careful attention they deserve. That is common practice.

The Government regret the fact that the official Opposition have sought to use the procedures of the House to call for the release of information which, if released, would have lasting consequences and undermine the established system of appointments to the peerage. That system has served successive Governments and it is vital to preserving the commission's ability to undertake its role.

Shaun Bailey: In her speech, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) articulated quite an interesting point. I tried to prise an answer out of her in my intervention, when I asked about the idea of the commission perhaps having a veto. Whether or not we disagree with that idea, does my right hon. and learned Friend not find it interesting that the Labour party will not state its definitive position on that? What is his opinion of that? Perhaps it is because Labour wants to use the existing system at some future point to benefit itself.

Michael Ellis: I have the feeling it will be a very long time before the Labour party is in a position to do that from the Government Benches.

The broader point is that the privacy rights of individuals need to be protected. The information shared to facilitate the vetting process is and must be handled carefully. It would be unwelcome for this House to set a precedent

that such information is released, because, as I have said, to do so could deter individuals from putting themselves forward for such positions. I urge the House to reflect on whether the motion before us accords with the principle of restraint that Parliament has characteristically applied to the use of its powers. The passing of the motion would risk compromising the ability of an independent body to perform its role and, constitutionally, would impede the role of the Prime Minister in advising the sovereign on appointments. The process is necessarily confidential and the Government think it is unwise for the House to call for such information.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, Brendan O'Hara.

3.34 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I shall heed the warning about moderation and good temper, which I am sure my SNP colleagues would say is in my DNA and runs through me like the writing in a stock of rock. Should I stray, I am sure that you would bring me back into line, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I was fascinated by the start of the Minister's speech and I tried to intervene, but he would not take my multiple attempts to do so. When he got to his feet, he began by questioning the appropriateness of the Opposition holding such a debate on this topic. Literally minutes before he questioned how appropriate it was, Lord Lebedev said:

"There's a war in Europe"—

hon. Members will recognise the phrase—

"Britain is facing the highest cost of living since the 1950s. And you choose to debate me based on no facts and pure innuendo."

That was precisely the Minister's opening gambit, which prompts the question: did he write the Minister's speech or did the Minister write his tweet?

That assertion was absurd, because we have come to learn, often through painful experience in this place, that when this Government and this Prime Minister assure us that there is nothing to see, it is wise to keep looking. That is why we fully support the motion and why, when the House divides, we will vote for the Government to hand over all documents, all minutes of meetings and all electronic communications containing or relating to the advice that they received about the appointment of Evgeny Lebedev to the House of Lords.

I reiterate in the strongest possible terms that today's debate is absolutely not about being Russophobic, as the Minister would shamefully have us believe. He said that to try to throw up a smokescreen cover for his beleaguered Prime Minister, and it does the Prime Minister and this House no service whatever to try to suggest otherwise. As has been said many, many times in this Chamber, our fight is not with the ordinary Russian citizen, but with Putin, his political leadership in the Kremlin and his friends, including the oligarch billionaires who have plundered Russia's wealth and resources and shipped them overseas, all too often to the UK and the City of London. Once they were in the UK, those billionaire oligarchs found many people in business and politics who, in return for their slice of the cake, were only too willing to facilitate the kleptocracy by hiding the oligarchs' plunder for them while providing them with what they desired most: a cloak of respectability.

The UK's willingness to welcome vast amounts of Russian money with very few questions asked about the source of that wealth means that there are now many Russians with close links to Putin who are very well integrated into the UK and who simply, because of that enormous wealth, have attained significant influence among the UK's business, social and political elites.

Since this Prime Minister came into office in 2019, £2.3 million of Russian-linked cash has been funnelled directly into the Conservative party. That has happened to such an extent that even the Intelligence and Security Committee raised serious concerns about undue influence being sought and, indeed, gained by friends of President Putin with the UK governing party.

That influence of dirty Russian money has not gone unnoticed abroad. Professor Sadiq Isah Radda, the most senior adviser to Nigeria's President on all matters of anti-corruption, described London as

"the most notorious safe haven for looted funds in the world today".

That is where we currently are in the world standings.

In January this year, as Putin prepared to invade Ukraine, the Centre for American Progress warned the City of London that

"uprooting Kremlin-linked oligarchs will be a challenge given the close ties between Russian money and the United Kingdom's ruling Conservative party, the press, and its real estate and financial industry".

It was always going to be the case that when Putin finally did unleash his illegal war in Ukraine, the UK would be forced to look at our role and how we have facilitated his gangster regime.

Stewart Hosie: My hon. Friend will have noticed that the Minister described the motion as a misuse of powers, implied that it would impede the Prime Minister in his constitutional role and argued that it is about a witch hunt against a single person. Is the truth not that the motion is about allowing us to understand whether or not the process of appointment has been corrupted? As my hon. Friend has mentioned Russian money, can he throw some light on why the Minister has doubled down on those ridiculous arguments?

Brendan O'Hara: Perhaps the Minister could reply for himself. I have no idea why he would double down on those ridiculous arguments.

My right hon. Friend is right that this is not about an individual. It is about a corruption of process, and that was always going to lead us to a re-examination of the Prime Minister's decision to send Evgeny Lebedev to the House of Lords for philanthropy and services to the media, as he put it. As we have heard, Mr Lebedev is a Russian businessman who derives his enormous wealth from his father, Alexander Lebedev, a former London-based KGB spy turned oligarch who still has investments in illegally occupied Crimea. At the start of this month, *The New York Times* said of Evgeny:

"Nobody is a better example of the cozy ties between Russians and the establishment than Mr. Lebedev."

Just how cosy that relationship is can be seen from the fact that the British Prime Minister personally campaigned for a peerage to turn plain old Evgeny into Baron Lebedev, of Hampton in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames and of Siberia in the Russian Federation, for the rest of his life.

I could go on about the absurdity of the House of Lords—the absurdity of a so-called democratic Parliament having an unelected upper Chamber into which family chieftains, high-ranking clerics of one denomination, failed and retired politicians and those with deep pockets who are prepared to bankroll a political party are thrust—but I will resist.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I make it clear that I have never met Lord Lebedev; I do not think I have ever been in the same room as him—but Dmitry Muratov has. He is editor-in-chief of *Novaya Gazeta*, an independent newspaper in Russia. The House will remember that he is also a Nobel peace laureate. He has said:

"The narrative being peddled in parts of the British media about him and his family is not only misjudged but actively dangerous. I urge you to consider who benefits from such untruths being told about a family that is known to be vocally critical of the Kremlin."

Is the Scottish National party doing the same thing?

Brendan O'Hara: With the greatest respect, we most certainly are not. If this Government are so scared of shining a light that has to be shone, at this of all times, there will be accusations of a cover-up and a belief that there is something to be hidden—something that this Government do not want seen. The debate today is all about allowing transparency. That is what this House should be all about, but unfortunately the Government and Conservative Members seem to be terrified of it.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Is not the real concern that the Prime Minister seemingly ignored Security Service advice? That is the issue. We do not make criticism of appointing the person as a peer; the concern is that the Prime Minister ignored security advice and appointed him despite that advice.

Brendan O'Hara: The hon. Member is absolutely right. This is about why the Prime Minister chose to ignore the advice of the security services, but there is also a hugely important back story about what got us into the position where he did so, and the implications of that.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My point is a rather similar one: if there was no problem with Lebedev being appointed as a peer and if the guidance from the security services was benign, what is the problem with scrutiny of that advice, which would put to rest all the concerns that people have?

Brendan O'Hara: That is right. A theme appears to be emerging on this side of the House. All we want to do is see what was there. All we want is to be reassured that the advice of the security services was not ignored, and that the appointment of Lord Lebedev was above board and beyond reproach. I do not think that, in a democratic system, that is too much for the House to ask.

As Putin's army continues to commit its war crimes in Ukraine, we have to get to the bottom of how a man with such close connections to the Kremlin was parachuted into this Parliament. We have to establish exactly what advice was given to the Prime Minister by the security

[Brendan O'Hara]

and intelligence services in the summer of 2020, and whether or not he chose to overrule that advice, or sought to alter it in any way, in order to get the outcome that he required.

We know that this was not a straightforward appointment. It could not possibly have been, particularly since, almost a decade ago, the head of MI6, Sir John Sawers, made it clear that he did not consider it at all appropriate for Mr Lebedev, then the owner of the *Evening Standard* and *The Independent*, to join him at MI6 headquarters for lunch. Advisers to the Prime Minister would have known for years of those security service concerns, and one would have hoped that an aspiring politician—or an aspiring Prime Minister—might be wary of becoming too close to Mr Lebedev, but that was not the case. It would appear that in return for favourable headlines in the *Evening Standard*, Mr Lebedev gained access to the centre of power in the Conservative party, and, particularly after 2019, the centre of the UK Government itself.

Surely Mr Lebedev's very public utterings about the illegal annexation of Crimea should have set alarm bells ringing in the Conservative party. Did no one in the Conservative party hear or take notice of him calling on western Governments to "stop cold war rhetoric" when they condemned Russia for its aggression in Crimea? Did no one notice his justification that because Crimea had been Russian "for many years", this was not something to get overly upset about? Did his claim in 2014 that Russia would not be making

"any further incursions into any land"

fall on deaf ears?

The clues were all there, if people chose to look for them. On Syria, Mr Lebedev said that Putin had "shown leadership" in the conflict, and urged the west to accept his offer of a coalition. He followed that up by saying, "Let us keep Assad in power", because it would be the least worst option, and he doubled down on that by saying:

"On this point I am emphatically with Putin."

The list is endless. Where was the condemnation of the events surrounding the poisoning of Sergei Skripal, and how in the name of the wee man did our Prime Minister end up having an off-the-record talk with Lord Lebedev—or Evgeny Lebedev, as he was then—48 hours after the Skripal poisonings?

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman at least concede that it was the Conservative Government who led a very robust international effort to respond to the Skripal poisonings, and that the Labour party was, at that time, led by someone who refused to condemn them?

Brendan O'Hara: The Skripal poisonings fit into this debate beautifully, because the fact is that an off-the-record meeting was held between the Prime Minister and Mr Lebedev within 48 hours, at the time of an international crisis, and we do not know why. [Interruption.] I am sorry; I thought that Members wished to intervene, but they are just chuntering.

Mr Lebedev and the Prime Minister socialised. They are widely known to have socialised in Mr Lebedev's castles in Italy and elsewhere, and in London regularly.

Mr Lebedev was present in 2016 at the private dinner when the now Prime Minister decided he was going to back the Brexit campaign. I have no idea what Mr Lebedev's view on Brexit is, but I do know that, in the year before, he wrote this in his newspaper:

"I have no doubt, based on conversations with senior figures in Moscow, that the Kremlin wants to make an ally rather than an enemy of Britain. And I also believe that it is in Britain's best interest not only to work constructively with Moscow, but to be an active, engaged player on the world stage."

I opened this speech by saying that when the Government tell us there is "nothing to see here", we should keep looking. The danger here, however, is that there is almost too much to see to make sense of. We know that the Prime Minister has been absolutely compromised by his relationship with Lord Lebedev. The public have a right to know if the Prime Minister gave an individual a seat for life in this Parliament against the advice of the security services. Desperately not wanting that to be the case is no reason for Conservative Members to block the release of this material. If there is nothing untoward, the Government should publish the material and put the matter to bed for once and for all. Then we could let Baron Lebedev return to doing hee-haw in the other place, as he has done with aplomb since he arrived there 18 months ago.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Obviously this debate is very well subscribed. I would prefer not to put a time limit on, and if colleagues could speak for around six minutes, we might get everybody in.

3.51 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The core part of the proposed Humble Address is a demand that we publish the advice of the House of Lords Appointments Commission in relation to Lord Lebedev. Labour Members know that, were we to do so, we would be in breach of the rules of that very commission, and they know that because the chair of the commission wrote to the leader of Labour party on 17 March this year saying that the commission's

"formal advice to the Prime Minister is confidential."

There is a reason for that. Labour Members also know what that reason is, because it was set out in that letter. According to the commission, the nominees consent to intrusive checks into their background, and they do so on the basis of confidentiality. As we have heard, other non-governmental contributors to that assessment process also provide their information on the basis of confidentiality. The chair of the commission says of publishing such information that it would be

"highly unfair on individuals to do so and risks undermining nominees' confidence in the confidentiality of vetting processes."

Labour knows this, and those views are not coming from a Conservative body. The commission has seven members, and only one is a Conservative appointee. There is a Labour member, Lord Clark of Windermere, as well as a Liberal Democrat and four independents, including the Chair. There is no suggestion from the commission that any rules have been breached. If there had been, of course there would be resignations. Lord Clark of Windermere has not resigned, and neither has the Liberal Democrat representative. So why do we have this motion, when it is clear that no rules have been

breached? I think it is because Labour Members are trying to smear the Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, and they are prepared to damage our institutions to achieve that goal.

I do not know Lord Lebedev. I have never met him. The Labour narrative is that he and people like him are trying to corrupt the Conservatives through Russian influence, but if that is so, it is not working very well. Look at Lord Lebedev's voting record. He is a Cross Bencher; he is not even a Conservative supporter. I had a look at his maiden speech, in which he said:

"I was raised here for a large part of my life, went to state school and consider myself British, but I am also Russian, which means that I can never be casual about liberty, free speech or the rule of law. Freedom of expression needs its champions. In the post-war era it has rarely been as under assault as it is now. I intend to join hands with noble Lords who can see that and are determined to fight it. A democratic, liberal nation, strong, healthy and free".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 May 2021; Vol. 812, c. 63.]

How subversive! His two written questions were on food banks and food security, and we have already heard that he has made no donations to the Conservative party. So where is the evidence that requires this exceptional approach to Lord Lebedev and the commission's assessment? There simply is none, other than smear and innuendo.

In response to the invasion of Ukraine, the Conservative Government have been at the forefront of global sanctions. They have supplied more than 10,000 anti-tank and anti-air missiles, trained more than 22,000 troops since 2015, sanctioned more than 1,000 individuals—the oligarchs with whom the Labour party is trying to smear the Government—to a value of £150 billion in the UK and sanctioned Russian banks to a value of over £500 billion in the UK. If the aim was to corrupt this Conservative Government, it is not working.

We are left with what seems to be a clever wheeze by the Labour party to smear and cause damage to the Government and the Prime Minister, but Labour Members should hesitate and look at themselves today because they are doing it at a cost to our institutions. The independent chair of the House of Lords Appointments Commission said it is

"highly unfair on individuals...and risks undermining...confidence in the...processes."

Labour Members should not be proud of themselves.

3.56 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I am puzzled by the Solicitor General's speech, which sounded as if he had written it before the Government decided at lunchtime not to oppose the motion after a revolt by their Back-Bench Members. Perhaps he, or his fellow Minister, will be able to clarify that in their response to the debate. Madam Deputy Speaker, perhaps you or Mr Speaker will be able to clarify the consequences were the Government to refuse to comply with the demands of this motion, if it is passed.

It would have been an easy solution for the Government to get out of this mess with their own Back Benchers, and out of the mess on Russian interference altogether, if only they had published and implemented in full the recommendations of the Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia report. They finally published the report after months of resistance by the Prime Minister and an attempt to fix the Committee by putting in a

Chair who would not publish the report, but they still have not implemented its recommendations. Most importantly, the Government have not implemented the report's central recommendation to hold a proper inquiry into Russian interference in Britain's democracy. I do not understand why that still has not happened.

There is a pattern, because it was this Prime Minister, when I first asked him and his predecessor about this in 2016, who told the House that there was no evidence of "successful" Russian interference in our democracy and democratic processes. They have stuck very carefully to that description. Time and again I was treated as some kind of eccentric, batty person when I first starting raising this as a genuine concern. I was simply expressing the concerns I had picked up from our intelligence and security services, which we now know made those concerns very plain to the Prime Minister in relation to his intention to give a peerage to Lord Lebedev.

There is a pattern here. We saw it in the Prime Minister's extraordinary trip, in the immediate aftermath of a NATO summit following the Skripal poisoning and chemical weapon attack in Salisbury, to the Lebedev castle in Tuscany for one of those parties—rather over-the-top parties, by the sound of it. The senior Lebedev was also present at that party, and of course it was President Putin who said, "Once a KGB officer, always a KGB officer." And the Prime Minister sent his close-protection officers away in an absolutely extraordinary breach of normal protocol.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Alex Lebedev owns Lebedev Holdings, which owns 75% of the *Evening Standard*. He supported the invasion of Crimea, on which he held a number of events in 2014. We do not know whether he tried to influence the Prime Minister at that point on Ukraine's territorial integrity; we now see that the invasion of the whole Ukraine was emboldened by that earlier invasion. The Government should release more information, because we just do not know what has happened.

Mr Bradshaw: Mr Lebedev's public statements were mealy-mouthed after the invasion of Crimea and we know that Lebedev senior has ongoing business interests in illegally occupied Crimea. I would be interested to know whether the Paymaster General knows or has even bothered to try to find out whether Lebedev junior does as well or whether he benefits from those business interests. We have had years of denials and obfuscation from this Prime Minister. We know, thanks to what the intelligence services have put on the public record, that they did warn the Prime Minister against this peerage, he ignored the advice and the rest is history, which is why we are debating this motion today. So when the Paymaster General or his colleague responds to this debate, will they confirm that if the House passes this motion, they will comply with it and publish all the relevant documentation in full, including the WhatsApp messages of the Prime Minister? We have heard other reports elsewhere in recent days that WhatsApp messages have mysteriously and conveniently disappeared from the Prime Minister's telephone. This is a completely unacceptable way of running a Government in a democracy, particularly one as precious and long standing as ours. That confirmation about all of those documents and the Government adhering to this motion will be very important.

[Mr Bradshaw]

Let us recall the credulity of the Minister at the Dispatch Box when he said, “Oh, Lebedev has been critical of Putin and of Crimea, and has done all these great charitable works.” An effective Kremlin asset in this country is not exactly going to make a reputation for themselves as being a massive supporter of the Kremlin, are they? The credulity of successive Ministers in this Conservative Government makes me feel as though something does not smell right here. They are still refusing to implement the recommendations of the Russia report and I do not see how that position is sustainable after the war in Ukraine—everything has changed. They could get away with this before that. They could get away with, as the Intelligence and Security Committee described it, the wilful ignoring of Russian interference—that is what it said happened under successive Conservative Prime Ministers and under this Government. They cannot get away with that any more. I advise the Paymaster General to go back to Downing Street and speak to the Cabinet and say, “Look, this is the way we are going to avoid this problem.” These problems are going to be repeated in the weeks and months to come, because more stories like this are going to come out about Russian interference and influence in our political system, many of which will touch the Conservative party. But this is not a party political thing, as there are Labour peers who are in equally invidious situations, but the Conservatives are in government and that makes this much more serious. This is friendly advice to the Paymaster General and his ministerial colleagues: come clean and put it all out in the open; implement the recommendations of the Russia report—stop running away from them and hiding from them; and have that inquiry into Russian interference and then everything can be out in the open and transparent. That is the only way, in the medium and long run, that we are going to be confident and satisfied in this country that our politics, democracy, political parties and individuals are not being subverted by the sort of behaviour we have seen from Putin, not just in this country, but in the United States and across the western and democratic world. I support the motion moved by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) and I hope the House will vote for it today, but the Government are going to have to implement it, and quickly.

4.3 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): This is an interesting one, as I came in with a different speech from the one I am about to give. What can I say? I must touch on the point made by the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) about this not being party political. I do not know what debate he has been sitting in for the past hour and a half, but I would certainly disagree with him on that statement. Let us consider this road to Damascus that the Labour party seems to have been on in respect of Russia. When we had the Salisbury attack, Labour’s previous leader was calling for Russia to be allowed to take back samples to test. This is absolutely crazy; it is like to Saul to Paul. The disbelief with which I have sat here today is incredible.

The issue of awarding peerages had dogged this place for a long time—we all remember Lord Levy, although the Labour party does not want to remember the

investigations that went on then—but it is as problem. As I said in my intervention, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) gave an articulate speech and touched on a really important point, which is about the broader process of peerages. I wish a more definitive answer had been given for how we solve this. That is the core of the debate. I appreciate that we are considering a specific motion on the release of information, but if we consider the principles behind the debate, it is very bizarre that the Labour party does not appear to offer up solutions to fix the problem for the longer term. Clearly, there is a longer-term issue and concerns about the advice given to Prime Ministers and from Prime Ministers in the appointment of peers. Would it not make sense to open up that debate?

My understanding of the role of an Opposition is that they are meant to put forward credible alternatives, not just sit here and moan. My concern is that I could not quite get a credible alternative from the Opposition in two times of asking—[*Interruption.*] I can hear the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) chuntering from a sedentary position, as usual, on that point.

When the Mayor of London was partying with Lord Lebedev in 2017, or when Labour Front Benchers were partying with him in 2011 and 2012, there was silence. What confuses me about this whole situation is the fact that it is one rule for them, as always, but another rule for everyone else. But that is the Labour party, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Sarah Owen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Shaun Bailey: No, I do not think so. The hon. Member has articulated her position from a sedentary position for a long time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) said that the core of the debate was a process issue. We do not want to undermine the process of the commission when there are GDPR and legal consequences of the motion passing. People put themselves before the process on the basis that it is confidential and they can give the full transparent disclosure that they are required to give. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Paymaster General has articulated, there is a real risk—

Sarah Owen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Shaun Bailey: As the hon. Member has been so persistent, I will give way to her.

Sarah Owen: I thank the hon. Member for giving way on this point. Transparency is key to today’s motion. If he is all for transparency, why is his party not supporting this motion to be transparent and honest with the British public? The Minister talked about protecting processes, but this is a question about whether the process protects the British people.

Shaun Bailey: I hear the hon. Member’s point about transparency and I get that—there is a broader conversation to be had about that—but as my right hon. and learned Friend the Paymaster General stated, we cannot do that at the risk of undermining the processes that are there. What I will say to the hon. Member—perhaps she and I will agree on this—is let us change the process. How about that? There is stunned silence at a Conservative MP suggesting changing the process, but that is the point I am trying to make.

There is a fundamental flaw in today's motion. Okay, the documentation is released, but what then? Labour seems to be clamouring for something that it skirts around in the motion but does not go forward to suggest change. It strikes me as absurd.

Munira Wilson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Shaun Bailey: I suppose I will give way to the hon. Member.

Munira Wilson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He says that there are no ideas forthcoming from the Opposition on how to change the process. Let me give him a bold and radical idea that my party has been championing for decades, which is that we should have a fully elected upper Chamber, not an appointed one. We would therefore not have to have this appointment process at all, and we would not have to have this discussion at all.

Shaun Bailey: Just to clarify, I never said that the Liberal Democrats did not have an idea, just the Labour party. I am fully aware of the hon. Member's party's position.

Let me respond to the undertones of the debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland pointed out, our response to Ukraine has not been hindered by this situation at all—with the 22,000 troops that have been trained, 10,000 missiles, the fact that we had the President of Ukraine appear in this Chamber and that he has thanked this Government for their intervention in Ukraine. The Ukrainian people say that this country stepped forward and they see us as their biggest ally in their fight for freedom—the undertone of the motion and the debate is disgraceful.

The motion is fundamentally flawed. I have no issue with backing a motion when it works, but this one does not even meet the procedure it tries to use. I come back to the point that we have been told that this is not party political, but I have been sitting in the debate for an hour now and I do not know how it could not be perceived as party political. Clearly, there are broader conversations to be had and I look forward to those ideas, but the motion is flawed and does not work. It is procedurally just not right and it seeks to undermine the existing processes, putting at risk the disclosure and transparency that we are trying to put across and the confidence people have to engage with the system. The motion is completely flawed, as I say, and it cannot be supported today.

4.10 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): This is a timely debate. In these historic and trying times, this country and our allies must be able to have trust in the Prime Minister on defence, on national security and on Russia. I am afraid to say that on all those fronts there are enormous questions for him to answer. My hon. Friends have outlined the concerns regarding the appointment of Lord Lebedev to the House of Lords. That is why this motion calling for the relevant documents to be published is so crucial. However, that is not the only cause for concern regarding the Prime Minister's judgment on the Lebedev family.

On 16 March this year I wrote to the Security Minister regarding the now Prime Minister's actions and his encounters with the Lebedev family in April 2018,

which, as others have said, was just a month after the Salisbury poisonings. We all remember the events of 4 March 2018, when the Novichok nerve agent was used to poison Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, who both became seriously ill following their contact with the deadly substance. Detective sergeant Nick Bailey, one of the first on the scene, was admitted to intensive care but thankfully survived.

On 12 March the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) came to the House of Commons and told honourable Members that it was "highly likely" that Russia was responsible for the Salisbury attack, saying,

"either this was a direct act by the Russian state against our country; or the Russian Government lost control of their potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others."—[*Official Report*, 12 March 2018; Vol. 637, c.620-21.]

Crucially, she said that the Foreign Secretary, now the Prime Minister, had summoned Russia's ambassador to the Foreign Office that afternoon to provide an explanation.

The following month, the then Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) attended a meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers at NATO's headquarters in Brussels. In advance of the meeting, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg outlined that Russia would be first item on the agenda, after what he said were several years of Moscow's "pattern of dangerous behaviour". He went on to say:

"It is also highly likely that Russia was behind the nerve agent attack in Salisbury."

That NATO meeting was on 27 April 2018. I outline the timeline and context to make it crystal clear that the then Foreign Secretary, now the Prime Minister, would have fully understood how serious the situation with Russia was back in April 2018, in the middle of the Salisbury incident. It is therefore incredible that he went straight from that NATO meeting to Palazzo Terranova in Italy for a weekend-long party hosted by Evgeny Lebedev, now Lord Lebedev.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) has already said, there the then Foreign Secretary met with Evgeny Lebedev's father Alexander Lebedev, an ex-KGB officer. That was confirmed by a spokesperson for Alexander Lebedev to *The Guardian*, which published the story in November 2019. When asked about the meeting, Downing Street declined to comment.

It is reported that the then Foreign Secretary attended the party with no security, and, other than a brief entry of ministerial interests on the Foreign Office website, where he declared an "overnight stay" there on 28 April—so we know it happened—there appears to be no official record of his time there, nor any details of any meetings or who else was in attendance. He left his officials and close protection officers behind, despite the Foreign Secretary's position being deemed to require round-the-clock protection from the Metropolitan Police.

While the Foreign Secretary was off the grid, partying with Lord Lebedev and his father the ex-KGB agent, the Novichok was still waiting to be found, in a bin seven miles north of Salisbury. It was found by Charlie Rowley on 30 June. Charlie survived his exposure to the Novichok, but sadly his girlfriend Dawn did not, having sprayed it directly onto her skin, believing it to be perfume. It is nothing short of a miracle, given what we

[Holly Lynch]

know about the Novichok and its reckless use, that more people were not seriously injured, with greater loss of life. A great deal of thanks is due to the professionals who worked tirelessly to respond to the risk and make the area safe. To leave a NATO meeting intended to co-ordinate the response of NATO members to the Salisbury poisoning, as Foreign Secretary, and fly directly to a party where a former KGB agent was in attendance, without security or officials, shows a somewhat catastrophic error of judgment. In September 2018, the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead, returned to update the House of Commons to confirm that, based on a body of intelligence, the Government had concluded that the two individuals named by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service were officers from the Russian military intelligence service, the GRU.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) Neston raised this at Deputy Prime Minister's questions two weeks ago, the Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), said:

"The hon. Gentleman is talking total nonsense and I do not have anything to add to what I have already said."—[*Official Report*, 16 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 889.]

This is utterly, utterly unacceptable. The Deputy Prime Minister might think that this sounds unbelievable, and he would be absolutely right—it does—but I have only outlined what has already been confirmed and published and is in the public domain. As a minimum, he owes my hon. Friend an apology. But beyond that, this Government and the Prime Minister owe the country an explanation. I am still waiting for a response to my letter to my counterpart, the Minister for Security and Borders, asking for answers. It is entirely right that the documents requested in the motion are published within the same spirit of transparency on this matter.

In addition to the documents relating to Lord Lebedev's peerage, may I also ask that an urgent explanation is made to this House regarding the Prime Minister's movements in April 2018? For him to decide to go to that party attended by a former KGB officer, at the height of the Salisbury poisoning, on the way back from a NATO meeting on Russia, left both himself and the country horribly exposed. I put on record my thanks to the fearless journalists who have put this information in the public domain. The Deputy Prime Minister's dismissal of the PMQ from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston is frankly beneath him. This is incredibly serious. The general public and our allies need an explanation from the Prime Minister, and we need the documents outlined in the motion to be published without delay.

4.17 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Lord Lebedev's case raises a wider question of the huge weaknesses that exist within our political donations system. For over a decade, foreign money has flooded our democracy. The Minister may like to claim, when he winds up this debate, that his party does not raise money from Russian oligarchs, but nearly £2 million in donations from Russia has found its way into either the Tory party or constituency association coffers since the Prime Minister took office.

A further £1.6 million has been donated to the party, its MPs and local associations by Aquind or its company directors. Recent investigations have revealed that one of its directors, Mr Fedotov, benefited from \$4 billion alleged fraud in Putin's Russia. Both Mr Fedotov and Mr Temerko have undertaken a co-ordinated effort to influence the Conservative party into support for their disastrous project, which would have caused untold disruption to my constituency. Since the project began, directors have bankrolled the equivalent of one in 10 Tory MPs, including the Paymaster General. That includes a string of current and former Ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and a serving member of the Intelligence and Security Committee.

We are still not completely clear where the company's money has come from or what the company's owners expected in return for their cash, but, like the concern expressed in the motion, it does not take much to connect the dots. In 2018, the project was magically designated a national infrastructure project by the then Business Secretary, taking the planning decision away from the local authority and giving it to central Government. Until the Paterson fiasco, it seemed a nailed-on certainty that the project would go ahead, despite the dedicated and unified opposition from my city and, specifically, the #LetsStopAquind campaign group. The Business Secretary faced a choice between the people of Portsmouth and a billionaire Tory donor facing fraud allegations. After much dither and delay, and a concerted local campaign, he narrowly made the right choice. However, my constituents continue to ask how Conservative Ministers came so close to allowing party donors facing corruption allegations to control a national infrastructure project. Can those who receive the funds from Aquind or its directors be sure that they are not indirectly benefiting from fraud? Like the motion today, the answers are uncomfortable for the Conservatives and worrying for our country.

The case of Lord Lebedev and the Aquind fiasco threaten to undermine our democracy and our national security. Now more than ever, we should be taking every possible step to insulate ourselves from the threat posed by those with links to Putin's political power, but for every second that the Conservatives are in power, their cronyism makes our whole country more vulnerable.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is talking about party political donations. When Unite, for example, donates £1 million to the Labour party and Labour Members of Parliament, or when many other trade unions make donations, what influence does that buy those trade unions? Do they write the manifesto, for example?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Sorry, I think there is a bit of confusion: I thought the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) was taking an intervention.

4.20 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The suggestion that Labour Members are somehow anti-Russian is not borne out by the facts and is just an attempt by Government Members to avoid the criticism that the motion makes of the way they handled the appointment of Lord Lebedev.

In order to understand why his appointment to the House of Lords is concerning, we have to look at the history of where the family money came from.

Evgeny Lebedev's father is a former KGB operative. He joined the KGB in the early 1980s, he was active in the KGB through perestroika and he was active in London. Although as a diplomat he had diplomatic cover, he operated as a spy out of Kensington Palace Gardens from 1988 to 1992. During perestroika, the KGB reformed itself. Rather than being an anti-capitalist organisation, it used the knowledge it had gained of capitalism, and members of the KGB became capitalists themselves. In an extraordinary way, many became extraordinarily rich in a very short space of time.

In the early '90s, Alexander Lebedev set up his first business. By 1995, he was able to buy a bank, the National Reserve Bank. It was a bank in financial difficulties; none the less, he had enough money to buy it. Its assets grew incredibly fast, and by 2006 his fortune was estimated to be \$3.5 billion. Not bad work for a member of the KGB. He was listed by "Forbes" as Russia's 39th richest man. He also purchased newspapers along the way—something that would be repeated by the family in later years.

In 1997, the Russian prosecutor general, Yury Skuratov, opened multiple investigations into Lebedev and the NRB, accusing the bank of tax avoidance and fraud. Skuratov also investigated Yeltsin's Government in the late 1990s, and he believed that Lebedev was spying on him to counteract the investigations into the NRB and the Kremlin. Leaks about Skuratov's personal life went on the internet and were traced back to an organisation called Konus, a security company linked to Lebedev's bank, the NRB. In 1999, a sex kompromat tape appeared showing a man who looked like Skuratov with two young sex workers. Kompromat is a set-up—basically, a honey trap—where people are filmed in compromising situations. Skuratov denied that it was him.

At the time that the tape was leaked, Putin was head of the FSB, the Russian spy organisation that replaced the KGB. Putin declared on national television that the man on the tape was Skuratov. Skuratov was sacked and the corruption investigations into Alexander Lebedev's bank and the Government collapsed. Putin then entered the Kremlin, and Lebedev's wealth increased exponentially.

Kompromats are used by secret services, especially the KGB. Our secret services have said that if someone put themselves in a compromising position, as the Prime Minister did when he went to the Palazzo Terranova, they too would have been on it, and would have tried to find evidence that the subject they were investigating had compromised themselves. That is why the security services are so alarmed by the behaviour of the Prime Minister—by the fact that he would leave behind his security detail and go to bunga bunga parties at Palazzo Terranova.

We have to understand that we are talking about a pattern of behaviour by Russian oligarchs. They have used London to launder their money—to turn dirty money into clean money—and then meticulously set about buying influence in various parts of British society. They are starting to buy political influence, social influence, football clubs, and newspapers—you name it, they are seeking to influence it. They are using strategic lawsuits against public participation against any journalist, newspaper or book writer who investigates what they

are up to. Political donations are part of this; £2.2 million has been donated since the Prime Minister became leader of the Conservative party.

Then there is VTB Bank, the second largest bank in Russia, which has been sanctioned by the Government. An individual who works for it, in global fixed income trading, has given £44,000 to the Tory party in the last two years, including £3,000 to the Conservative party in Greenwich, my borough. We are fighting local elections; why should they be paid for by Russian money that comes from a bank that is associated with the Kremlin? Why should somebody who is paid by a Russian bank finance local government elections in this country? How is that justifiable?

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Given what my hon. Friend says, he will be interested to hear that Lord Wharton, who was appointed to the Lords on the same day as Mr Lebedev, is a former adviser to Alexander Temerko, who has distributed money to Tory MPs and the Tees Valley Mayor. Yesterday, it was revealed that the Mayor's close relative has been appointed to Lord Wharton's Office for Students. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister's dodgy actions are perpetuated throughout the Tory party?

Clive Efford: I absolutely do. We need to shine the light of accountability on what has been going on. That is what the motion calls for. It calls for the evidence to be published—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. It is important that references are not made to Members of the House of Lords who are outside the scope of this motion; I say that just so that Mr Cunningham is clear.

Clive Efford: I am grateful for that clarification, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was concerned; I was worried. I will finish off, before you criticise me for going on too long.

The motion calls for the evidence to be published—simple as that. That is why there has been a collapse in the number of Tory Back Benchers in the Chamber, and why the Government are not voting against the motion—because their Back Benchers will not vote against it; it is a perfectly reasonable motion, calling for accountability from a Prime Minister who has behaved disgracefully and could have compromised the security of this country. That is what the motion is about. It is a disgrace that the Conservatives are not voting for it and not holding the Prime Minister to account.

4.28 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford). He is absolutely right: the logic, or rather lack of logic, of the Government's argument beggars belief. If the Government believe that what is in the motion is wrong, and that it should not be agreed to, they have the option of voting against it, but they will not do that because their Back Benchers will not allow them to.

Actually, what is being asked of this House is not unreasonable. We are asking for the release of the information that led to the appointment of Lord Lebedev. Ultimately, the issue of the appointment of Lord Lebedev

[Andrew Gwynne]

hinges on two things—transparency and national security. The Government's dangerous links to Putin's oligarchs are putting Britain at risk. The British public deserve to know why the son and business partner of an ex-KGB agent was allowed to be nominated to the House of Lords. That is not and should not be a controversial thing to ask of the Government.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I hope this is also not a controversial point to raise, but could the hon. Member just confirm whether he campaigned for the former leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), to sit on the Front Bench and lead his party?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Lady knows that I have been a Member of Parliament for 17 years, and as a Labour MP, I want a Labour Government. I have to say to the hon. Lady that if we had a Labour Government right now, we would not be allowing dirty money in British politics. We have made it quite clear, year after year, that we need to clean up the financing of our political system.

Jonathan Gullis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Gwynne: I have already given way, and I will give way a bit later if the hon. Gentleman will allow me to make my argument.

I would argue that this is not and should not be a controversial thing to ask of the Government, but the Conservative Government are asking us to do an extraordinary amount on their behalf. They are asking us to take their word for it that the appointment of Lord Lebedev had absolutely nothing to do with the Prime Minister's cosy relationship with the newspaper owner. They are asking us to ignore the overnight stay the Prime Minister had with the mogul in his flashy villa in Perugia when he was Foreign Secretary. They are asking us to ignore the trips in Lebedev's private jet and the lavish parties, as well as to ignore the staunch support of the *Evening Standard* for the Prime Minister when he was running for a second term as Mayor of London.

The Government are asking us to ignore the comments from the Prime Minister's former chief adviser; to ignore reports that the House of Lords Appointments Commission advised against the appointment of Lord Lebedev, only for the Prime Minister to personally intervene and push through the appointment; and to ignore the concerns raised by the security services, and the fact that the Prime Minister reportedly got very cross when he was told that Lord Lebedev represented a security concern. They are asking us to ignore Lord Lebedev's defence of Vladimir Putin and his illegal invasion of Crimea in 2014, to ignore Lebedev's calls for Britain to make Vladimir Putin an ally, and to ignore his parroting of Kremlin conspiracy theories and his doubts over Putin's links to the murder of Alexander Litvinenko.

I ask colleagues: is this a fair thing for the Government to ask Members of the House of Commons to do? Does this seem like the actions of a responsible Government and Prime Minister? I know that some on the Government Benches will say that the Government's pre-packaged

response lines are almost as nonsensical as they are predictable, and on that point I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Jonathan Gullis: The hon. Gentleman talks about the dangers, apparently, of this Conservative Government, but I am terrified by the fact that, at the last general election, the then Leader of the Opposition was someone who had been friends with the IRA not long after the Brighton bombing and laid wreaths for Black September. Those are the scandalous things that are dangers—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman has to be very careful if he has not notified somebody when he intends to make allegations about them, and he should know that.

Andrew Gwynne: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman has not noticed that the Labour party has changed, but certainly people in the country have, and I would say to him that I hope the Whip on the Treasury Bench is paying due attention, because he did read out some of the points on page 4 of the Conservative party brief.

The Government claim that Lord Lebedev was nominated in recognition of his contribution to the UK and his charitable ventures. If that is the case, let us see the formal information concerning the appointment of Lord Lebedev. If there is nothing untoward, there is no reason not to publish the advice.

The urgency of this request cannot be overstated. As we debate here in this Chamber, Vladimir Putin is wreaking destruction on the people of Ukraine. His forces are murdering people in their thousands, and displacing millions more. We speak with one voice in this House of Commons and this British Parliament when it comes to the disgraceful actions of Putin in Ukraine.

For over a decade, however, Putin's money has been allowed to flood into our democracy. Nearly £2 million of Kremlin cash has found its way either to the Tory party or into constituency association coffers since this Prime Minister took office. That should be a profound mark of shame for Conservative Members. In that context, Labour Members are requesting this vital information. We, and the people we represent, need to know whether the Prime Minister puts the national security of this country ahead of personal relationships. This is about a basic prerequisite for the job.

I have no doubt that most Conservative colleagues will abstain from voting, and therefore this humble address will pass. I hope, and sincerely expect, that the Government will follow the letter of the humble address, and release the information forthwith. However, I urge colleagues to think carefully about the message that their actions send out of this place, and I urge them to do more than abstain and to vote with Labour Members. Let us send a strong message that Putin's cronies will not be tolerated in British democracy, and that we in this House uphold the highest standards of integrity and transparency. Release the Security Service's advice to the Prime Minister, so that we all know what he was told and the actions that followed.

4.37 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): I have spoken many times in this House in recent weeks about the troubling closeness of the relationship between many in this

Government and Russian oligarchs, often with direct links to the Kremlin. Yet despite the clear evidence presented to the Prime Minister, much of it from our own intelligence services, the Government have repeatedly and deliberately turned a blind eye to those concerns. Even now, when presented with overwhelming facts about Evgeny Lebedev, and his father's past in the KGB, far from acting swiftly and decisively to cut out the Kremlin's insidious influence, Conservative Members have instead welcomed Putin's cronies with open arms. Flush with oligarchic cash, it is little wonder that they have done little more than sanction a few prominent Russians, none of whom are Tory party donors. As bombs continue to rain down on Kharkiv and Kyiv, that is an insult to the millions of Ukrainians who are fleeing for their lives amid the ongoing bloodshed. It is an outrage.

As I have already alluded to, just a few thousand roubles is all it takes to gain access to the corridors of Whitehall. One such example was when the Conservative party accepted £30,000 from the wife of a former crony of Vladimir Putin. The donation was from Lubov Chernukhin, who is married to former Russian Deputy Finance Minister Vladimir Chernukhin. That was despite the then Defence Secretary's own warnings, just weeks earlier, about Russian cyber-attacks, and it led to farcical scenes that included the UK Defence Secretary giving Mrs Chernukhin a private tour of the Churchill War Rooms in Whitehall.

Given that influence in the Conservative party is so easily bought, major questions over Russian financial influence need to be addressed urgently. Such actions put our national security at risk and potentially corrupt the very politics and democracy that we seek to uphold. We need to root out that dark money and truly defend democracy by cleaning up the malevolent foreign influence that is a consequence of that money. The Government have done none of that, though, because their insatiable greed has blinded them and continues to see them play fast and loose with our national security.

It is important to make the point, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) did earlier, that the vast majority of Russians are decent people. Not everyone is linked to Putin just in the same way that, fortunately, not everyone in the UK is linked to our corrupt Government. That is why Labour is calling for Lebedev to be stripped of his peerage not because of his Russian citizenship, but because of his links to the Kremlin.

Lebedev's father was a member of the KGB, as exposed so well by my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) and many other Labour colleagues. In this post-cold war era, we may well have previously been able to plant that fact firmly in the rear view mirror, but when the current President of Russia is a former KGB agent who continues to act as if he is carrying out orders directly from the Lubyanka, killing people on British soil in the process, it cannot be right that one of Putin's close associates is sat in his robes able to influence our democracy in the opulence of the other place.

The Prime Minister cannot claim that he was not aware. His former chief of staff recently stated that he was in the room when the Prime Minister was told that intelligence officials had serious reservations about giving Lebedev the honour. That same advice was changed

after the Prime Minister personally intervened and then, just months later, the first Lord of Siberia was ennobled. It is patently clear that the Prime Minister bent the rules to suit himself and put his personal interests and friendships first. Why? The truth is that he has been in hock to Lebedev for years. Lord Lebedev of Siberia quite literally helped him to secure two terms as Mayor of London, while also ensuring the Conservative party remained in Government.

As proprietor of the *Evening Standard*, London's largest newspaper, Lebedev has repeatedly intervened to influence the outcome of elections. On 30 April 2012, just before the now Prime Minister was facing an election to secure a second term as Mayor, the front page of the *Evening Standard*, issued to almost a million Londoners, screamed:

"Boris Johnson: The right choice for London".

Then, on 5 May 2015, just days before the general election, the front page once again instructed its readers:

"As we prepare to go to the polls in a knife-edge election, the Standard urges its readers to consider what is best for our capital... and support the Tories".

The link is clear, present and direct.

In any functioning democracy, that level of propaganda would be called out, but sadly in the UK the press barons wield enormous influence, and one must question whether organs such as the *Evening Standard* are pulling the Prime Minister's strings. Is that not the real reason why the Prime Minister is so averse to stripping Lebedev of his peerage? To do so would mean biting the hand of the puppet masters who feed him.

The Government can and must do more to help the people of Ukraine, as Opposition Members have said. As Declassified UK and openDemocracy recently revealed, British businesses recently sponsored an arms fair where sanctioned Russian weapons makers showed off munitions currently being used to attack Ukraine. It gets worse. While the Government were repeatedly spouting rhetoric in this Chamber about taking tough measures—this is scandalous—the Minister for Defence Procurement, the hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), was among the guests at the world defence show in Riyadh. Other attendees included at least four Russian firms sanctioned by the UK Government as well as others whose executives have been personally sanctioned. Perhaps the Minister, in winding up, can tell us why his colleague was there, and why he was at the same murderous arms fair as Russia's biggest arms exporter, Rosoboronexport, part of the sanctioned state conglomerate Rostec, which was busy promoting tanks and drones that independent arms researchers at the Omega Research Foundation identified as weapons used by Russia in the current war in Ukraine. Earlier this month the Russian Ministry of Defence even shared videos on social media of helicopters, exhibited at that very same fair by Rosoboronexport, firing at Ukrainian forces, yet our Government were there and present. That is shameful.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sam Tarry: No, I won't. Our defence procurement Minister was also rubbing shoulders—[*Interruption.*] I will give way at the end. Hear how bad it gets. Our defence procurement Minister was also rubbing shoulders

[Sam Tarry]

with representatives of Almaz-Antey, a Russian state-owned anti-aircraft manufacturer also sanctioned by the UK for

“providing heavy weaponry to separatists in eastern Ukraine, contributing to the destabilisation of Ukraine”

that we see today in Russia’s all-out war. He was also pressing the flesh with representatives of UralVagonZavod, another sanctioned state-owned company exhibiting at the fair that manufactures tanks.

The reality is that the Government’s empty rhetoric, weak actions and toothless sanctions are giving cover to Putin’s murderous regime and costing lives in Ukraine. It is shameful. All of us on the Labour Benches would like the Minister to show some gumption and tell us the real reason why the Prime Minister is so unwilling to so much as even entertain the possibility of stripping Lebedev of his peerage and sharing the information we have requested. The Prime Minister’s continual failure to act makes a mockery of our democracy. It highlights the cesspool of cronyism and corruption that the Government are wallowing in and is an insult to the families of the dead who have lost their lives in this ongoing conflict.

Mr Holden: The real insult the hon. Gentleman should be thinking about is the insult to the dead people killed on the streets of Britain when the leader he supported asked the Kremlin to check whether it was their poison that had killed them or not. Does he not reflect on the fact that Britain was the first country in the world to provide military training and defensive weapons in support of the Ukrainian people, or that it was his party, under Ed Miliband, that did everything possible to stop our support for the Syrian opposition at that time? [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. First of all, the hon. Gentleman knows that he should not refer to another Member by name; he needs to refer to their constituency. Secondly, it is important that we stick to the motion in front of us. There is a bit of a tendency to wander off into different subjects that are perhaps leading us slightly astray from the matter in hand, which is the process we are discussing with regard to peerages and so on. It was said at the beginning that we should try to keep our language moderate and calm. I think we need to return to that and I am sure Mr Tarry will now do so.

Sam Tarry: Of course, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was merely thinking about the wanderings of the defence procurement Minister, which ended up at Russian arms fairs.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s comments, the irony is that if people had listened to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who for years and years has been calling for sanctions and actions against Russia, then perhaps those guys on the Government Benches would not have been—[Interruption.] I was just trying to answer the question. If only they had listened to the advice of Labour Members who were saying how dangerous it was that relationships with the Russians and our Government were far too cosy.

The Prime Minister’s continual failure to act makes a mockery of our democracy, and highlights the cesspool of cronyism and corruption at the heart of this Government. I am saying that this is a moment to reflect. The unwillingness to share that information and to shine a light of truth—a light of truth—into what many people across the country are wondering, led me to reflect on something I once read. Professor Richard Sakwa said in his seminal book “Russian Politics and Society”:

“Under late communism, nepotism and patron client relations undermined the political criteria of elite recruitment in the nomenklatura system. The political elite began to degenerate into a social class, perhaps one of the most economically useless in history...the Party fostered a class that grew at its expense and began to transform itself into a traditional oligarchy.”

That is a description of the collapsing Soviet Union, yet it could be used to describe the regime of the Conservative party.

4.50 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I have attended almost every debate we have had on an economic crime Bill up until this point. In my role as my party’s spokesperson on foreign affairs when the Navalny list first came out well over a year ago, I started to name some of the names, and I have since done that in a more comprehensive form. Every single time this issue has come to this place, it has generally been discussed in a cross-party spirit. If we possibly can, I really want us to elevate ourselves from where the debate has been so far. It is in everyone’s interest to root out even suggestions of corruption in our politics, in any form and undertaken by any party.

I put it to all Members that this issue is not easy for any party. Parties of all colours, of mixed colours and all the rest of it have at some point floated close to this. It is absolutely right that our free media asks questions and that this House is allowed to scrutinise. That is exactly what underpins the very thing that Putin does not want, which is democracy. I sincerely hope that in all that we are agreed.

Although on the face of it this debate is about process, I believe it to be a debate about questions and the fundamental integrity of those who take their places not just in this Chamber but in the other place. While we have a democracy—a democracy that the Intelligence and Security Committee suggests has been under the threat of Russian interference—it is right to ask questions about how someone may have reached a level at which they have influence and, indeed, the ability to vote on the law of this land.

I point out that the Liberal Democrats have long campaigned on this issue—indeed, every single Liberal Democrat Lord is signed up to losing their own job because we believe we should have an elected House of Lords. That is our proposal. Were that system in place, they would be appointed by their constituents—the voters of this country—and we would not be having these discussions, or at least not in this way. But that is not what currently happens, so let me come back to the process.

The problem with the appointment of Lord Lebedev is that our free media, with its ability to root around in these questions and shine light into the darkness, came across evidence to suggest that the Prime Minister overruled or bent—whatever it may be—the advice of

the security services and the commission. The question being asked is why we are focusing on Lord Lebedev; well, because this has not happened in this way before. The advice of the commission was overruled one other time, and that was also by this Prime Minister—indeed, that was the first time—so there is form. That was the first time ever that a Prime Minister did that.

Let me put this all into context. Today, the Metropolitan police have issued fines for parties that the Prime Minister told us categorically from the Dispatch Box never happened. The problem is not the process; I argue that it seems the process is actually working. The commission makes recommendations based on what it heard from the security services. It seems that the problem might be the Prime Minister, which is why this debate is important. We have to separate the wheat from the chaff. To what extent is the process working—actually, I think it is—and to what extent have we had interference in our democracy at a number of levels, of which this is potentially one example? I say “potentially” because we just do not know. The purpose of the motion is to shed light. Let the truth be out.

I hear what the Minister said about the process somehow being denigrated. However, it sounds to me as though the process would be reinforced, because the process said that Lord Lebedev should not be given a peerage, and that therefore reinforces the need for the commission in the first place. It was just doing its job, which it did well, but it seems that the Prime Minister overruled it. He claims that he never did that, and there is a counter-claim by Dominic Cummings—let us all take that with the pinch of salt it absolutely deserves.

I think the Government should welcome the publication of this information. I have spoken to Government Members who want to see this come out. I am proudly in WhatsApp groups with Government Members who, like me, care about our democracy, who are trying to push through the economic crime legislation, who are frustrated that it took six years for part one to come and are desperate for part two, and who have spoken collectively and positively about what the Government are finally doing, for example, on SLAPPs—strategic lawsuits against public participation—and other issues. We are grasping the nettle and it will be difficult for all of us. However, the Government are somehow now standing at the Dispatch Box and twisting this into anything other than what it is, which is a cool-headed look at how our democracy has been functioning for decades and an understanding of how Russian interference has permeated, like a rot, through our economy, society and even our politics.

We all have to admit that this process is going to be difficult. I wish that the Government would admit that and say, “Yes, it will be difficult, but we are going to do this anyway because it is the right thing to do.” By looking into that Pandora’s box, they may well find things that they do not want to know about. The Government seem to be taking an ostrich mentality, and I kind of get it, except we are all here as custodians of our democracy, putting the country first. I genuinely think that any Government who chose to deal with this matter would be rewarded by the public for doing so, because they would be grateful, especially at a time of national crisis, when people and authoritarian regimes are seeking to undermine our democracy. There has never been a better time to root out of the evil of corruption, no matter where that leads.

Fundamentally, this is what needs to happen: we need not only all the information to be published, but an independent inquiry into what happened and how the Prime Minister was involved, or was not. I am genuinely sorry to say this, because it reflects on our whole country when we do not know if our Prime Minister is telling the truth or not, but we just do not know. In the same way that Sue Gray has rooted out what happened after the Prime Minister said that no parties ever took place, and they did—I am afraid that we cannot trust his word at this moment—we need an independent inquiry to verify whether or not he may have inadvertently misled the House previously. That is why this Humble Address is important: it will help, not hinder, the situation.

The other thing that I do not understand is why the Russia report recommendation to investigate and publish fully the extent of Russian interference in our democracy has not been carried out.

I will quote from the Intelligence and Security Committee’s report, because it is so important:

“Several members of the Russian elite who are closely linked to Putin are identified as being involved with charitable and/or political organisations in the UK, having donated to political parties, with a public profile which positions them to assist Russian influence operations. It is notable that a number of Members of the House of Lords have business interests linked to Russia, or work directly for major Russian companies linked to the Russian state—these relationships should be carefully scrutinised, given the potential for the Russian state to exploit them.”

I commend the speech of the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford), who hit the nail on the head. It is not necessarily a question of the words of Lord Lebedev, which other hon. Members have quoted; I fundamentally disagree with him, but there were Members of this House with the same views and it could be said that those views are genuinely held. That is fine, but the point is how the Russian state and particularly the oligarchs have acquired their money. I used to sit on the Public Accounts Committee, and we had a phrase: “Follow the money.” Following the money very often leads to where the power really lies.

The issue in this case is that the money has been used to buy access and influence. We know how these oligarchs operate: they do things that, on the face of it, look great. They quite often fundraise for causes that may publicly be different from what they are being told to do. It is very sophisticated. The face of corruption looks nice—it gives people champagne, it buys them nice things, it lets them have a good time. I am not suggesting straight out that that is what Lord Lebedev has done, but it is right that we ask questions, because that is the *modus operandi* of the entire oligarch system.

Andrew Gwynne: I would argue that the Ukraine invasion by Putin’s forces has brought sharply into view the extent of the involvement of Kremlin-linked people and organisations, not just in this country—although obviously we are concerned about this country—but across the west. As we speak with one voice on Ukraine, is it now time to speak with one voice on cleaning up British politics once and for all? If not now, when?

Layla Moran: I absolutely agree: now is the time. It is worth saying that that would not just apply to Russian oligarchs, because we know that other countries have sought to do the same thing. Investigating the extent of

[Layla Moran]

the interference in our democracy would set us up for a much stronger future, so I believe that this is the right motion at the right time.

I also argue that we should have rooted out the corruption years ago. In fact, it was a Conservative Prime Minister and a Conservative Chancellor who first suggested that at the Dispatch Box. I have said several times that it should not be this hard to implement a Conservative party manifesto promise. We are getting there, so, please, let us continue the cross-party spirit in how we go about rooting out corruption. That extends, I am afraid, to the dealings of Lord Lebedev as someone who is allowed to vote on this country's laws—the one oligarch who seems to have been allowed to do that. I urge the House to back the motion.

5.3 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). I would dearly love to speak at length about some of the Conservative party's many friends and donors and those of the Prime Minister, but of course that would be out of scope, Madam Deputy Speaker, so you will be delighted to hear that I will stick to the subject of the debate: the appointment of Lord Lebedev.

"A democratic, liberal nation, strong, healthy and free: I pledge that everything I do in this House will be to defend and further these principles."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 May 2021; Vol. 812, c. 63.]

Those were the concluding words of the maiden speech of Lord Lebedev of Hampton in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames and of Siberia in the Russian Federation, to give him his full title—a title that sounds as if he may have a foot in both camps. That five-minute maiden speech is the only contribution that he has made in the other place since his appointment in July 2020, almost two years ago. "Everything I do", he said: nice claim, but—I hate to disappoint—he does not appear to have done anything.

The problem, as I see it, is that Lord Lebedev's elevation to the other place bears all the hallmarks of an undemocratic, illiberal nation with increasingly weak and unhealthy institutions. We are meant to have processes in place to stop what has happened in this case. As I understand it, ordinarily the House of Lords Appointments Commission vets and approves nominations for life peerages, relying on the security advice provided by the Cabinet Office and the security services. The commission's recommendations are almost always followed. I say "almost always" because the Prime Minister, in this case, seems to have put his personal interest above the national interest, and may have overruled the advice of the security services in the commission's recommendations in awarding Evgeny Lebedev a peerage.

Jerome Mayhew: Since the allegation appears to be that Lord Lebedev is using his position in the other place as a way of subverting our laws, is it not rather surprising that he has not taken the opportunity over the last two years to exercise that vote even once?

Matt Western: Why should he? Why does he need actually to speak in the House of Lords? He has the power, the status and the influence, and, may I say, the

protection that that peerage affords him, which is why we are limited in what we can say about him now. He has all the power that he wanted, all the influence he seeks, just by the very nature of that peerage. He need not say a word down the other end, and he probably will not, although we look forward to the moment when he does, and I am sure we will all be in the Chamber listening to him.

Alex Cunningham: I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that those friendships and networks go right to the top of Government, all the way to No. 10 Downing Street and the Prime Minister, who has enjoyed this person's hospitality, travelled on his jets and holidayed with him. He has that contact, that influence, at the highest point of Government.

Matt Western: I do indeed agree with my hon. Friend. Just last week I mentioned the bunga bunga parties, which I think we should know a great deal more about. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) mentioned, in connection with another case, the videotapes and negatives that may exist. I would not be surprised if they were held somewhere else.

Let me return to the issue of the appointment through the commission. I should be interested to know how many nominations it has rejected, and I have tabled a parliamentary question to that effect.

The Prime Minister's relationship with Lord Lebedev is extensive, intimate and long-standing, and it should be of real public and national interest. However, for far too long their alleged collaboration has been ignored. As the proprietor of both the *Evening Standard* and *The Independent*, Lord Lebedev was clearly a useful contact for the Prime Minister in his role as Mayor of London, but the professional soon turned personal. It is reported that the Prime Minister attended four parties at Lord Lebedev's Umbrian villa during his time as London Mayor—and then there are the bunga bunga parties. According to *The Times*, the Prime Minister visited Lord Lebedev's fantasy castle in Perugia every October for five consecutive years, from 2012 to 2016. Remarkably, none of that has been reported by the *Evening Standard* or *The Independent*. I should have thought that, published in the celebrity or showbiz columns, it would attract a great deal of interest. However, *The Times*, thankfully, reports that the Prime Minister accepted £7,150 worth of flights, cars and accommodation from Lord Lebedev between 2013 and 2015.

According to the Prime Minister's biographer, Tom Bower, the Prime Minister was told that when attending these parties, he could behave like a "naughty schoolboy", and we know from a former Minister that "girls" were promised by Lord Lebedev. One particular trip, reported in April 2018, occurred just weeks after the attempted assassination of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury. The Prime Minister managed to evade his close protection officers and, as has happened time and again, he refused to account for what took place. We know that Alexander Lebedev, a former KGB colonel—we say "former", but we never know with these things—was also in attendance. What we also know is that the Prime Minister was on his way home—a very circuitous way home—from a conference of NATO Foreign Ministers. So, what was discussed with Alexander Lebedev and Lord Lebedev? Of course we do not know, but given its proximity to that meeting, it would be of real interest to find out.

The concern is not necessarily the friendship itself, although that is of course relevant, but the threat that it poses to national security. These concerns have been continually raised, going as far back as a decade. Sir John Sawers, the former head of MI6, reportedly made it clear that he did not deem Evgeny Lebedev a suitable person to meet, ahead of his meeting with Chris Blackhurst, the then editor of *The Independent*, which was soon to be bought by Lord Lebedev for a mere £1. Of course, it was not that cheap, given the sizeable debts that the newspaper carried. Since then, in 2013, Lord Lebedev has publicly questioned the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, tweeting an article casting doubt on who was behind the murder and writing:

“Was Litvinenko murdered by MI6?...Certainly more to it than the generally accepted Putin link.”

Let us follow the money. While Lord Lebedev has publicly come out against the invasion of Ukraine, his father, the ex-KGB agent with large shares in Gazprom and Aeroflot, remains silent as millions flee and thousands perish in the dreadful war in Ukraine. Lord Lebedev's father, who has held significant investments in Crimea since Russia occupied it in 2014, also retains a significant share of the newspaper via Lebedev Holdings.

I raise the personal relationship between Lord Lebedev and the Prime Minister only to highlight the extent to which it has obviously influenced the decision to award Lord Lebedev a peerage. It has been reported that civil servants were stunned by the Prime Minister's move to question the security services' assessment of the appointment. The only justification I can find for the Prime Minister's dismissal of this security advice is his personal relationship with Lord Lebedev. Personal interests over national security. Whatever happened to Sir Mark Sedwill, the former Cabinet Secretary and, as I understand it, the lead on UK intelligence?

Lord Lebedev's case also raises wider questions about the glaring weaknesses that exist within our political donations system. A Labour party calculation based on Electoral Commission information estimates that donors who have made money from Russia or Russians have given £1.93 million to either the Tory party or constituency associations since the Prime Minister took up his position. Since 2010, the figure is £4.3 million. For example, Lubov Chernukhin, who is married to Vladimir Chernukhin, a former Finance Minister under Putin, has donated £700,000 to the Conservative party. In October, the Pandora papers revealed that Vladimir Chernukhin was allowed to leave Russia in 2004 with assets worth about \$500 million and that he retains Russian business connections. In October 2020, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), now the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, posted a picture on Instagram of herself and Lubov Chernukhin at a party at the Goring hotel, with the hashtag “#cabinetandfriends”. Unfortunately, foreign money and foreign interference go hand in hand, and I am afraid that this Government are compromised by both.

In summary, the appointment of Lord Lebedev, the dismissal of security service advice in favour of personal interest, and the wide-ranging influence of dubious Russian money in our politics are deeply concerning and worrisome. A Prime Minister acting in his own self-interest, not the national interest, is extremely serious. This Humble Address will merely scratch the surface, for I fear that there are decades-worth of personal

connections to unearthing, financial loopholes to close and national vetting procedures to tighten before we can truly say we are a

“democratic, liberal nation, strong, healthy and free”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 May 2021; Vol. 812, c. 63.]

That is why I will be supporting our motion.

5.14 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The United Kingdom has long been a defender of freedom, democracy and human rights, and our country has proudly stood firm against crime and corruption at every opportunity. It is, therefore, frankly astonishing that, at a time when Vladimir Putin is committing war crimes in Europe, a UK Government Minister has been dragged to the Dispatch Box to defend his own Prime Minister's murky and deep links to Russian oligarchs.

It tells us all we need to know about this Government that, in his previous role as Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister chose to party with the family of an ex-KGB agent, just weeks after the attempted assassination of British citizens by Russian state agents on our own soil.

It is utterly outrageous that the Prime Minister would nominate to the House of Lords someone who has promoted some of the very worst conspiracy theories in defence of the Putin regime. We are used to the Prime Minister putting his own interests before the interests of the British people, but on this occasion he has gone further by putting his personal friendship with the son and business partner of an ex-KGB agent before the safety and security of the British people. He has put his friendship with Lebedev ahead of his primary duty to the British public: to keep our country and our people safe and secure.

That is why Labour is today calling for the Government to publish the full security guidance on Mr Lebedev's peerage, by which we mean the version before it might have been mysteriously airbrushed or sanitised, so that the British public can really understand the severity of the Prime Minister's miscalculations and misjudgments. This is in the national interest, and it must happen immediately.

We also know that the Prime Minister flew to Italy to attend a party hosted by the Lebedevs just two days after attending a high-level NATO summit focusing on Russia in the wake of the Salisbury poisonings, without any officials present and without his security detail. We know that he met the former KGB agent Alexander Lebedev at that party. We need to know what was discussed at that party and why the Prime Minister thought it was a priority to go to that party to meet influential members of the Russian elite at that time.

This blasé attitude to national security is not just a one-off; it is part of a pattern of behaviour that dates back several years. There are countless examples of the Government playing fast and loose with our national security. Just look at the Conservative party's ongoing reliance on donations from individuals with close links to the Kremlin. The most concerning is the £2 million of donations from Lubov Chernukhin, the wife of Putin's former deputy Finance Minister. She moved in Conservative inner circles, even playing tennis with the Prime Minister. We may never quite know just how much influence that money bought for Putin's allies.

[Stephen Kinnock]

In connection to this, I am deeply concerned by the Conservative party's use of lawfare to bat away the questions I have asked about potential national security threats that predate the issues we are discussing today. In February 2019, I wrote to the then chair of the Conservative party, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), asking him to investigate donations by Ehud "Udi" Sheleg, who had been reported in the media as having strong connections to Russia and as probably not being able to afford the £1.8 million of donations that may or may not be connected to his being appointed treasurer of the Conservative party—I would not wish to speculate.

The reply I received from the right hon. Gentleman made it clear that Mr Sheleg should not need to reveal the source of his wealth. It also threatened me with libel action, with the right hon. Gentleman, who is now Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, using the same tactics that Russian oligarchs have been using to silence criticism and block investigations.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I need to make sure that the hon. Gentleman is referring to the matter in hand, which is Lord Lebedev and the appointment process.

Stephen Kinnock: Thank you, Madam Speaker. What I am trying to do is set out clearly the worrying pattern of behaviour, but I take your feedback and I will move on.

That brings us to the issue of the Russia report, the delay in publishing it and the failure to implement the vast majority of its recommendations until after Vladimir Putin clearly felt he could invade Ukraine with impunity. This is part of the challenge we face in standing up to the bullying and intimidation from authoritarian rulers around the world. The delays in implementing that report's recommendations are deeply troubling. Why was this action delayed? We have repeatedly asked that in this House. Perhaps it was because on this Government's watch we have seen the City of London become a laundromat for the dirty money of kleptocrats and because the Conservative party has been all too reliant on those highly questionable donations we are discussing today. We have also seen serious issues associated with the underfunding of our armed forces, which has left us with Putin being able to go on the march from Georgia to Crimea and authoritarian regimes having grown in confidence over the past decade because of the weakness of western leaders, because of the conflict of interests that undermines their authority. We are exposing that conflict of interests in this debate. It is time for us to shore up our national defences. That needs to be done through legislation such as the Bill that became the National Security and Investment Act 2021. Disappointingly, we have not seen a clear enough position on that, with the Government watering down definitions of critical national infrastructure in that Bill, which makes it harder for the Secretary of State to call in investments suspected of being a danger to our national security. Our legislation on foreign takeovers and investment is far weaker than the equivalent legislation of our allies in all the other Five Eyes countries.

Let me end by saying this: national security is the first duty of any Government, but Conservative Ministers have been putting roubles before resilience, and investment

before integrity. We need to see what was in this security advice and we need to know on which date the Prime Minister received the security services' concerns with regard to Lord Lebedev's appointment. We also need to know why that was watered down. Appointments to the House of Lords should be on the basis of loyal public service to our country, not friendship with the Prime Minister. Yet the Prime Minister continues to dismiss vital advice time and again, even when Britain's national security is at stake, to serve his own personal interests. I therefore encourage Conservative Members to join us today in standing up for Britain's national security.

5.23 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On Saturday, I had the pleasure of attending a 2050 Climate Group young leaders event, where young leaders were being given some ideas about how they might want to influence politics. It was a great event and the young people at it truly gave me faith for our future, as they had some excellent questions. Aimee Dobie, from the parliamentary outreach service, does outreach right across Scotland and was explaining to them about influencing MPs and Lords, and about how they could get in touch with Members of the House of Lords. One young person in the room put up their hand and said, "What are the checks on the House of Lords? How does that work?" I said, "In reality, there are very little checks on the House of Lords. Members of the House of Lords are appointed and they can be there for life. Removing those Members is all but impossible." This young person asked about the appointments to the House of Lords and about the House of Lords Appointments Commission, because he was very switched on.

That goes to the heart of why we are here today, because the House of Lords Appointments Commission should be a brake on the appointment of people to the House of Lords, yet even though we hear that security concerns were raised about Lord Lebedev, this advice was overturned by the Prime Minister. The Paymaster General was very clear earlier when he stressed that the commission would draw concerns about any issue to the attention of the Prime Minister, but that seems to me to miss the point because the Prime Minister is at the heart of this shoddy appointment. There has been a clear misjudgment on the basis of his friendship with Lord Lebedev and, of course, the Prime Minister has some form on that as well, having overruled the House of Lords Appointments Commission on a previous appointment in 2020.

The Paymaster General also stressed that Lord Lebedev is a British citizen of Russian extraction, and that is true. We do not cast aspersions on British citizens who are of Russian extraction in general, but in this case and a number of others that is exactly how the kleptocrats and oligarchs buy their way in. They buy their children the finest education at the most expensive private schools. They buy themselves a clean reputation by becoming patrons of the arts, universities and charities, buying football clubs and giving philanthropic donations, laundering their reputations. The Foreign Secretary said on television regarding the photograph of her with Lubov Chernukhin:

"I think we've got to be very careful to distinguish between those who are supporters of the regime, those who are propping up Vladimir Putin and those people who may have moved from Russia years ago and who are part of the British political system."

Some of these people have bought their way in to the British political system, and that is part of the problem.

Putin's cronies, these oligarchs, have bought their way in to the political system in many different ways. They are sealed in on a super yacht with a golden visa and they are spending their lucre via a protective web of companies and vehicles such as Scottish limited partnerships, unheeded and unimpeded until the war in Ukraine, which suddenly made things bad for business. All that money coming in did not happen overnight.

I noticed earlier that Oliver Bullough's new book, "Butler to the World", is available in the Commons Library. It has not yet been checked out and I recommend that Members rush along the corridor to get it, because it is instructive about the scale at which people buy influence in this country and the way in which people in this country have allowed that to happen through the lawyers, the accountants and the very expensive reputation management firms that do that. Britain has become butler to the world, and this Government are allowing it to continue.

That is all a symptom of a higher problem, which is the problem of the House of Lords. I would not impugn their lordships individually, of course, but the whole system of inherited privilege exists here with patronage and rewards for pals, cronies and donors. Unlike all the other parties in this place, the SNP does not appoint people to the House of Lords. We never have and I hope very much that we never will, because, given the reputation of that place, it is not worth it. Despite what my good friend the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) says about her colleagues signing up to abolish themselves, I am certain that if the Liberal Democrats were offered a place in the House of Lords tomorrow, they would take it up. That is how the system works, and it stinks.

Appointment to the House of Lords is, of course, for life. There is no longer a Titles Deprivation Act as there was in 2017 and despite the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) during the cash for honours scandal there is no simple way to remove people from the House of Lords. At various points Members of the House of Lords of various different parties have been up to their cheeks in scandal. Transparency is not present there at all in the way that it is in this place. The Russia report points out in very clear language that the House of Lords registers are not as open to scrutiny as those in the House of Commons. It is fundamentally opaque. They are not held to the same standards as people in this place, and this place is not always held to the best of standards.

The response to the young man who asked me that question on Saturday is that there is a whole lot more that this place could do to enhance the scrutiny of the House of Lords, but my view is that it is beyond help and should be abolished altogether.

5.29 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I thank all those who have spoken in this debate; we have had many excellent contributions on the importance of ascertaining with clarity the Prime Minister's role in the appointment of Lord Lebedev. It is a matter of national security. We have heard some compelling speeches from

hon. Members on the Opposition Benches, cutting to the heart of why the debate is so important to the functioning of our democracy.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who gave a detailed timeline of the events in 2018 when the Prime Minister visited Lebedev's castle two days after the NATO meeting. She also raised an important point about thanking journalists for the role they have played in ascertaining much of this information.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford), who outlined how potentially being placed in a compromising position is a security risk. My hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) made the point, among others, that the Prime Minister appears to put his personal interests above the public interest. My hon. Friends the Members for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) and for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) spoke about the importance of freedom and democracy, and the worrying pattern of behaviour of playing fast and loose with national security.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) asked what Labour would do with the appointments process. Our answer is simply that there should not be an appointed upper Chamber at all. Government Members seem finally to be waking up to that: yesterday, the Policing Minister condemned what he called the "unelected partially hereditary House", and said it was right for, "the views of those of us who took the trouble to get elected to prevail".—[*Official Report*, 28 March 2022; Vol. 711, c. 629.]

The Conservatives are in government, and we look forward to any proposals that match ours for an elected, democratic upper Chamber. In the meantime, however, it is quite reasonable that we propose some level of scrutiny and transparency for the current system.

That is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) asked whether the Government would review the House of Lords appointment process and called for a robust vetting system, as has the Lord Speaker recently. I hope the Minister can say whether they will consider that request from the other place, as well as from the Opposition Benches.

Today, hon. Members across the House have spoken in defence of democracy and the parliamentary sovereignty that many Government Members have spoken so passionately for, so I was particularly concerned to hear the Paymaster General's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) that he would refuse to honour a resolution of this House simply on the grounds that it was proposed by the Opposition. I hope the Minister will retract that and confirm that, if the motion is passed, the Government will accept the will of this elected House.

As speakers have alluded to, this debate's binding vote is about transparency and holding those in power to account for the decisions they make—an essential factor in a healthy democracy. The British public have a right to know how an individual of apparent concern to our intelligence services was granted a seat at the heart of our Parliament by the Prime Minister against security advice. Such action is a complete abdication of his responsibility as Prime Minister.

[Rachel Hopkins]

As the arbitrator of the ministerial code, the Prime Minister has a duty to oversee the standards of conduct expected of Ministers. His foreword to the code in 2019 stated that to

“win back the trust of the British people, we must uphold the very highest standards of propriety”.

This is what our Humble Address aims to do. By publishing the minutes, documents and advice relating to the appointment of Lord Lebedev, we can peel back the opaque rhetoric and rumours to find out what advice was provided to the Prime Minister and what course of action he decided to take. I am sure many will agree that 2019 feels like a lifetime ago, as we have sacrificed so much since then to tackle the spread of coronavirus and sadly lost loved ones, but those were the Prime Minister’s words then and he should fully abide by them now.

I am sure both the Prime Minister and the Minister are fully aware of the seven principles of public life—the set of principles that we expect all in public life to abide by, be they civil servant, local councillor or even Prime Minister of Great Britain: integrity, objectivity, accountability, transparency, honesty and leadership. All of us in this place are accountable to those standards, and they are the bare minimum that we expect from our leaders. The first duty of any Government led by any party is to keep the British public safe. This debate is not the first time that the Prime Minister’s priorities have been brought into question. What the British public are presented with is a Prime Minister with a track record of playing fast and loose with the rules that govern institutions.

Today’s Humble Address aims to ascertain additional information on the process that led to the appointment of Lord Lebedev. If the allegations are proven to be true, they will cast doubt on whether the Prime Minister can be trusted to uphold national security. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne said, the Prime Minister’s long and close friendship with Lord Lebedev appears to have clouded his judgment when considering matters of national security. Earlier this month, *The Times* reported that in 2013, Sir John Sawers, the then head of MI6, made it clear that he did not deem Lebedev to be a suitable person to meet. As the son of an ex-KGB agent, it was believed that Lebedev, a Russian citizen with ties to celebrities, politicians and musicians, was keen to ingratiate himself with the British establishment and glitterati. If reports are true, it seems as though the Prime Minister, in his previous roles, was willing to assist. The friendship developed and the Prime Minister accepted the litany of expensive meals that we have heard so much about today, and holidays at Lord Lebedev’s 12th-century Italian castle in Perugia. A source told *The Times* that after the 2019 election the Prime Minister “pathologically wanted to get” Lord Lebedev’s

“peerage over the line...it was immediate.”

The Cabinet Office plays a vital role in the vetting process of Lords’ appointments and is responsible for relaying intelligence and guidance to the House of Lords Appointments Commission. The vetting process uncovered that the security services’ assessment of Lord Lebedev allegedly remained unchanged from 2013: he still posed a national security risk, leading to reports

that the House of Lords Appointments Commission advised the Prime Minister to appoint someone else. However, it took just some seven months after the 2019 election for the Prime Minister to push Lord Lebedev’s nomination through. So while the public’s priority was addressing the uncertainty around leaving the EU and the devastating pandemic that took hold in the early part of 2020, the Prime Minister’s priority was securing a peerage for an old friend.

Shockingly, reports by *The Sunday Times* and a written statement by the then chief of staff to the Prime Minister allege that he “cut a deal” to provide the House of Lords Appointments Commission with a “sanitised” version of the advice. If that is the case, that is an irresponsible undermining of due process. The Prime Minister has prioritised his personal friendship with the son and business partner of an ex-KGB agent ahead of his duty to ensure that the British public are safe. For the Prime Minister to nominate to the House of Lords someone who has promoted the worst conspiracy theories and defences of Vladimir Putin shows just how flawed the Prime Minister’s judgment is and shows that the Conservative Government’s dangerous links to Putin’s oligarchs are putting Britain at risk.

Appointments to the House of Lords should be on the basis of loyal public service to our country, not friendship with the Prime Minister. This issue cannot simply be brushed under the carpet. The British public deserve answers on whether the Prime Minister, with assistance from the Cabinet Office, has ridden roughshod over the Lords nomination process. The Prime Minister continues to dismiss vital advice time and again, even when Britain’s national security is at risk.

Thankfully, we are proud to live in an open democracy where transparency is a key factor of good governance, ensuring that those in power are held to account. To protect the public’s trust in our institutions and our obligations to abide by the principles of integrity, objectivity, accountability, transparency, honesty and leadership, today’s Humble Address needs to pass. Questions must be answered about the Prime Minister’s role in the nomination process of Lord Lebedev. Let us uncover what has taken place and whether national security has been sidelined in the Prime Minister’s pursuit of personal interests. If Conservative Members believe in decency, honesty and standards, I urge them all to join us in voting in favour of our Humble Address.

5.39 pm

Michael Ellis: With the leave of the House and yourself, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to close the debate.

Let me thank the House for the robust debate on this motion. As has become only too clear, it has, I am sorry to say, become something of an excuse for the Opposition to bring their usual, unfounded criticisms to the table. The insinuation that this Government are soft on Russia—which I think is what this debate is supposed to be about in the eyes of Labour—is obviously nonsense. In fact, our support for Ukraine is second to none. President Zelensky himself has spoken of the United Kingdom in glowing terms; the Russian Kremlin has spoken of this Prime Minister as its principal opponent. We are doing everything and more, and we will continue to do that, to support the people of that sovereign and independent state, so I rebut any suggestion that this

Government are in anything other than an exemplary position in supporting the people of Ukraine and resisting the Putin regime's actions.

But this is not about the people of Russia. This is not about British citizens who are of Russian extraction. To smear a British citizen of Russian extraction in order to score cheap political points against the Prime Minister, who has been Ukraine's principal ally and is doing a superlative job, seems counterproductive when—if I can say this with the greatest possible respect—Members on the Labour Front Bench and Sadiq Khan, the Labour Mayor of London, have taken hospitality from Lord Lebedev, and when the Leader of the Opposition has sent a congratulatory text message, apparently, to Lord Lebedev on his appointment. As I have said, I do not personally criticise that, but it does seem counterproductive in the light of this debate.

However, back to the topic in hand. We should not visit the sins of any father on his sons or daughters. We did away with Acts of Attainder a very long time ago, but there has been frequent reference to people's parentage, which I do not think is appropriate. If we look at the topic at hand, we see that, as has been reiterated throughout the debate, the motion is focused on a misunderstanding of the constitutional position. The House of Lords Appointments Commission, HOLAC, is an independent body. It seeks advice from the appropriate vetting agencies. The advice it gives to the Prime Minister—which it has given to Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and so on, since 2000—is confidential. However, today's motion would breach the critical confidentiality that underpins the process, damaging the ability of that valued committee, and its independent members, to undertake its role. The motion is careless of the question of the data of private individuals and would allow private information about individuals to be disclosed whenever a political party—any political party—wished for that to happen for purely partisan purposes.

Clive Efford: If the motion is nonsense and we are wrong, will the Minister confirm that he has enough votes on the Benches behind him to vote it down?

Michael Ellis: I think the hon. Member knows that the common practice is not to vote on Opposition motions—[*Laughter*—]and for very good reason.

This motion, as the hon. Member knows and as the House knows, is very careless of the position I have outlined. We need to ensure the ability of that committee to conduct robust vetting and to provide advice that is not compromised. The process should continue to be conducted confidentially.

Reference was made by the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) earlier in the debate to the ISC's report, which was published in July 2020. That was welcomed by the Government. The Government's response was published on the same day as the ISC's report, and I would say this on Russian intelligence. We expelled 23 undeclared Russian intelligence officers after Salisbury. We have attributed cyber-attacks where appropriate to Russian intelligence, we have exposed those involved in hacking, and we have exposed the military build-up on the Ukrainian border. We do what we need to do to protect the national security and national interests of this country.

Layla Moran *rose*—

Michael Ellis: I am conscious of the time, but I will give way.

Layla Moran: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. All those things are very laudable, but will he enlighten the House on how many of the recommendations to the Government in the Russia report have been implemented?

Michael Ellis: That has nothing to do with this matter, as I am sure the hon. Lady well knows. I reiterate that we must ensure the ability of the House of Lords Appointments Commission to conduct robust vetting, and to provide advice that is not compromised. That process should continue. I have heard hon. Members say that certain individuals do not mind if detail of the vetting process is disclosed as far as it concerns them. Well, I reiterate that this is not about any one individual. If someone wishes to show that they have nothing to hide, that is laudable and understandable, but we need to protect the process for all. This is not about one individual; it is about protecting the integrity of the system—a system that serves this nation very well. The process should continue to be conducted confidentially, and disclosure should be at the discretion of the Prime Minister.

Mr Bradshaw: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, given that he referred a moment or two ago to my remarks on the Russia report, and claimed that the Government welcomed its publication. I have to remind him and the House that the Prime Minister tried his darnedest to prevent the report's publication—so much so, that he tried to put a patsy in the Intelligence and Security Committee as Chair, but failed. It was only when that failed that the Committee published the report. The Prime Minister did everything in his power to prevent the publication of the report, and has failed to implement its recommendations.

Michael Ellis: I do not recognise the right hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the Prime Minister's position. The right hon. Gentleman knows full well that no one can hold a candle to this Prime Minister in his integrity, honesty and opposition to the Putin regime. That has been proven time and again, throughout the international arena.

Holly Lynch: Will the Minister put some speculation to bed right now by either confirming or denying that the Prime Minister met Alexander Lebedev in April 2018?

Michael Ellis: I have no individual knowledge on that point, but the House of Lords Appointments Commission, in the person of Lord Bew, wrote to the Leader of the Opposition, after he wrote to Lord Bew, and addressed the matter, and nothing disorderly is said to have occurred. The fact of the matter is that the processes are followed routinely, as they have been throughout. How the vetting process works in any individual case is outwith my knowledge, but the Labour party ought to exercise caution—I say it respectfully—in casting aspersions on individuals because they happen to have Russian ancestry or heritage. That is the effect of the motion, and it is unworthy and certainly inappropriate.

[Michael Ellis]

In conclusion, we must ensure the ability of the commission to conduct robust vetting, and to provide advice that is not compromised. This process should continue to be conducted confidentially, with disclosure being at the discretion of the Prime Minister, who is, after all, ultimately responsible for making recommendations to the sovereign on appointments to the House of Peers; and the commission, independent of Government, is responsible for vetting nominations. I urge the House to reflect on whether this motion is a responsible use of its powers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That, given the concerns raised about the appropriateness of, and process for, appointing Lord Lebedev as a member of the House of Lords and the role of the Prime Minister in that process, an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty that she will be graciously be pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House, no later than 28 April,

(a) any document held by the Cabinet Office or the Prime Minister's Office containing or relating to advice from, or provided to, the House of Lords Appointments Commission concerning the appointment of Evgeny Alexandrovich Lebedev as a Member of the House of Lords; and

(b) the minutes of, submissions relevant to and electronic communications relating to, any meeting within the Cabinet Office or the Prime Minister's Office at which the appointment of Lord Lebedev, or advice relating to that appointment, was discussed in a form which may contain redactions, but such redactions shall be solely for the purposes of national security.

Business without Debate

REGULATORY REFORM

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 18(1)),

That the draft Legislative Reform (Renewal of National Radio Multiplex Licences) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 17 March, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

The House divided: Ayes 268, Noes 195.

Division No. 235]

[5.49 pm

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel	Badenoch, Kemi
Afolami, Bim	Bailey, Shaun
Afriyie, Adam	Baker, Duncan
Aldous, Peter	Baker, Mr Steve
Anderson, Lee	Baldwin, Harriett
Ansell, Caroline	Baron, Mr John
Argar, Edward	Baynes, Simon
Atkins, Victoria	Bell, Aaron
Bacon, Gareth	Berry, rh Jake
Bacon, Mr Richard	Bhatti, Saqib

Blackman, Bob	Foster, Kevin
Blunt, Crispin	Fox, rh Dr Liam
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Frazer, rh Lucy
Bowie, Andrew	Freeman, George
Bradley, Ben	Fuller, Richard
Bradley, rh Karen	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Braverman, rh Suella	Garnier, Mark
Brereton, Jack	Gibson, Peter
Bridgen, Andrew	Gideon, Jo
Brine, Steve	Graham, Richard
Bristow, Paul	Gray, James
Britcliffe, Sara	Green, Chris
Browne, Anthony	Green, rh Damian
Bruce, Fiona	Griffith, Andrew
Buchan, Felicity	Griffiths, Kate
Buckland, rh Sir Robert	Grundy, James
Burghart, Alex	Gullis, Jonathan
Burns, rh Conor	Halfon, rh Robert
Butler, Rob	Hall, Luke
Cairns, rh Alun	Hammond, Stephen
Cash, Sir William	Harper, rh Mr Mark
Cates, Miriam	Harris, Rebecca
Caulfield, Maria	Harrison, Trudy
Chalk, Alex	Hart, Sally-Ann
Chishti, Rehman	Hart, rh Simon
Chope, Sir Christopher	Hayes, rh Sir John
Clark, rh Greg	Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Clarke, rh Mr Simon	Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Clarke, Theo	Henderson, Gordon
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Higginbotham, Antony
Clarkson, Chris	Hinds, rh Damian
Cleverly, rh James	Holden, Mr Richard
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hollinrake, Kevin
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Hollobone, Mr Philip
Colburn, Elliot	Holloway, Adam
Collins, Damian	Holmes, Paul
Courts, Robert	Hosie, rh Stewart
Coutinho, Claire	Howell, John
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Huddleston, Nigel
Crosbie, Virginia	Hudson, Dr Neil
Crouch, Tracey	Hughes, Eddie
Daly, James	Hunt, Jane
Davies, Gareth	Hunt, Tom
Davies, Dr James	Jack, rh Mr Alister
Davies, Mims	Javid, rh Sajid
Davison, Dehenna	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Johnson, Gareth
Docherty, Leo	Johnston, David
Donelan, rh Michelle	Jones, Andrew
Dorries, rh Ms Nadine	Jones, rh Mr David
Drum, Richard	Jones, Fay
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Jones, Mr Marcus
Duddridge, James	Jupp, Simon
Duguid, David	Kawczynski, Daniel
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Kearns, Alicia
Dunne, rh Philip	Keegan, Gillian
Eastwood, Mark	Knight, Julian
Edwards, Ruth	Kruger, Danny
Ellis, rh Michael	Lamont, John
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Latham, Mrs Pauline
Eustice, rh George	Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Evans, Dr Luke	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Everitt, Ben	Levy, Ian
Fabricant, Michael	Lewer, Andrew
Farris, Laura	Lewis, rh Brandon
Fell, Simon	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Firth, Anna	Logan, Mark
Fletcher, Katherine	Longhi, Marco
Fletcher, Mark	Lopez, Julia
Fletcher, Nick	Lord, Mr Jonathan
Ford, Vicky	Loughton, Tim

Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Mills, Nigel
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob

Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Alan Mak and
 David T. C. Davies**

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Bardell, Hannah
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty

Blake, Olivia
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Burgon, Richard
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Charalambous, Bambos

Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flynn, Stephen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Girvan, Paul
 Glendon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Kate
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz (*Proxy vote cast
 by Pat McFadden*)
 Khan, Afzal

Kinnock, Stephen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewis, Clive
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paisley, Ian
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pollard, Luke
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeter, Wes
 Stringer, Graham

Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Owen
Timms, rh Stephen
Turner, Karl
Vaz, rh Valerie
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan

Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Jessica Morden and
Liz Twist

Question accordingly agreed to.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have just voted on the social security motion and ought not to have done so, as I chaired the Delegated Legislation Committee yesterday. I have voted in the Aye Lobby and the No Lobby to nullify the vote, but I owe you and the House an apology for that error of judgment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I think we will accept the apology. We do not want another Division, do we? Thank you very much for your point of order and your forward notice of it.

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Nicola Richards be discharged from the Education Committee and Angela Richardson be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Brendan Clarke-Smith be discharged from the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and Darren Henry be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITIONS

Halton Hospital

6.5 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): My constituents call upon the Government to select Halton and Warrington for major investment to create two new first-class hospital campuses, one in Halton and one in Warrington. The current hospital site is not only located in a deprived neighbourhood, but parts of the hospital estate are more than 45 years old and it is no longer fit for purpose. An online petition on the same cause received 1,526 signatures, which demonstrates the very strong local support for the two new hospitals for the future. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to prioritise Halton and Warrington and create two new hospital campuses, one in each area, as part of the new hospital programme.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the people of Halton should be able to access first class NHS facilities and services on their doorstep; further that tackling health inequalities must be considered as part of the Government's approach to levelling up; further that Halton Hospital is located in a deprived neighbourhood; and notes that a third funding bid to create two new hospital campuses in Warrington and Halton was recently lodged after two previous pleas for more capital investment fell on deaf ears.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to prioritise Halton and Warrington and create two new hospital campuses, one in each area, as part of the New Hospital Programme.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002724]

Proposed Lidsing Garden Village Development

6.7 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Capstone Valley and its surrounding areas, which sit between my constituency and that of my hon. Friend for Gillingham & Rainham (Rehman Chishti), is under constant threat of housing development. The petition, first posted online and signed by 3,681 local residents, makes clear the opposition to the potential decimation of an area of outstanding natural beauty. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage Maidstone Borough Council to consider the concerns of local residents and cancel plans to develop Lidsing Garden Village.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Maidstone Borough Council is proposing to build over 2000 houses, named Lidsing Garden Village, on farmland at Lidsing, a small hamlet of 13 houses near Hempstead, Lordswood and Bredhurst; further that there has been very little community engagement on the proposed development, with many local residents finding out via social media; further that the area is accessed by country roads which would be completely grid-locked by the development if it went ahead; further that the only road improvement proposed to support the additional traffic – an additional 4000 cars or 10,000 extra car journeys every day – is a spur road to the M2 motorway which will destroy an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty; and further that health services locally are already overstretched and will not cope with the needs of potentially 8000 extra residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage Maidstone Borough Council to consider the concerns of petitioners and cancel plans to develop Lidsing Garden Village.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002726]

ADJOURNMENT

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

6.8 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 29 March 2022

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

General Practice: Large Housing Developments

9.30 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered general practice capacity for large-scale housing developments.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Dowd. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting me this important debate and to colleagues who have come along this morning and who clearly have the same issues in their constituencies.

Every one of our constituents hugely values the ability to get a timely appointment, without too much hassle, at their local surgery. General practice is the front door of the NHS and all GPs, practice nurses, clinical pharmacists and the whole primary care team do an amazing job under enormous pressure. I express my profound gratitude to them.

In parts of England a third more GP appointments were delivered between September and November 2021 compared with the same period in 2019, yet many of our constituents regularly tell us of the difficulties they have getting a timely appointment at their surgery. GPs and primary care staff are exercised about the strain on the system. In addition, there is considerable variability in the numbers of GPs, practice nurses and people in direct patient care roles per 10,000 registered patients. I think there should be a recommendation as to how many patients a GP should have. I accept that different populations in different parts of the country will have different demands, so a number of indicative levels would be required. We have requirements in relation to the number of children who can be in a class, so why is it different for patients in GP practices?

I have analysed the numbers of GPs, practice nurses and direct patient care staff per 10,000 registered patients in each of the three primary care networks that cover my constituency and, with one exception for GPs in one primary care network, the whole of my constituency has fewer GPs, practice nurses and direct patient care staff per 10,000 patients than the averages for England and for the east of England. From the plans I have seen from my clinical commissioning group, the projected increases in primary care staff will not be enough to bring my constituency up to the average, and I am told that no figures for future GP recruitment are available from the CCG because GP recruitment is left to individual practices.

As a country, we know that we need to build more homes. and I want everyone to be decently housed. Too many people still do not have a decent home. As elected representatives, we also know that new housing development is often vigorously opposed by existing residents. That opposition has some merit to it if the existing services in that area are already under strain and are going to be put under even greater strain.

A constituent wrote to me on Saturday to say:

“Leighton Buzzard has expanded massively in the last 20 years, however the investment in infrastructure and facilities has in no way kept pace with this and access to healthcare is inadequate leaving the GP surgeries under great pressure despite the best efforts. I dread to think what the situation will be like when the massive building programme is completed.”

That is spot on. Everyone pays taxes, and those new residents will make their contribution, so it is essential and only fair that the services in an area expand as the population rises to meet that growth.

I am told that in Norwich North, the seat of my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, who is not here to speak for herself, wave 4b CCG funding will provide an extension for one local surgery, but that will accommodate only a small fraction of the population increase and no provision is being offered for another GP practice or through section 106 money.

I understand that in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), who, as Leader of the House, is a member of the Cabinet, 6,000 new homes are planned for Hucknall, a town where the GPs are already oversubscribed and there is no commitment to a new Cavell health centre to meet the needs of existing and new residents.

I have rarely found children without a school place to go to. However we plan for additional school capacity when massive new housing schemes come along, the system seems to work reasonably well. The classrooms get built and the teachers employed to welcome those new children and to give them a good-quality education. That is not my experience with general practice capacity, however. I represent an area that is due to have about 14,000 new homes built and that already has, before those new residents arrive, below-average numbers of GPs and primary care staff.

Sir Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend made an important point about the planning on education places. What we need to see from Government and local authorities alike is a much more robust approach to developers, to ensure that they are paying for what is required and that they are not leaving it to the NHS and local communities to pick up the bill. We need to see that strong lead from Ministers, for them to be standing up for communities and not for developers.

Andrew Selous: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend and I defer to his expertise on education. I would add that an element of retrospection is needed, because many of those new housing estates have already been rolled out in our constituencies. The new infrastructure levy cannot be just going forward; there is an immediate deficit that we need to remedy.

The system is broken, and that is the reason I have been campaigning on the issue and have called this debate. Contributions from section 106 funding or from the community infrastructure levy often go to provide other facilities rather than for health. The guidance states:

“It is helpful if the Director of Public Health is consulted on any planning applications (including at the pre-application stage) that are likely to have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of the local population”.

I do not think it is “helpful”—it is absolutely essential. It should be a requirement that leads to a clear outcome

[*Andrew Selous*]

of additional ring-fenced health funding to employ and accommodate the necessary GPs and practice nurses that the area's population requires.

I have good support in my request. When I put that point to the Prime Minister on 5 January this year, he replied:

"Yes...my hon. Friend...is completely right: we cannot build new homes without putting in the infrastructure to go with it."—[*Official Report*, 5 January 2022; Vol. 706, c. 20.]

I can quote no higher authority, Minister.

My argument is that no new infrastructure is more important than looking after the health of the existing and new population in an area. At the moment, the system is fragmented and uncertain, in that we might be lucky and be funded through section 106 money or we might be lucky and get it from the community infrastructure levy. Again, we might be lucky and get what is needed from the housing infrastructure fund. If we are fortunate, the local authority might come to the rescue, or it could be that Treasury funding to the Department of Health and Social Care will do the job. My CCG tells me, however, that capital funding from the Treasury for new general practice capacity appears too late to be of any use in making a sensible forward plan, and disappears equally quickly.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that while developers sometimes offer to create new premises for an additional GP practice, that does not resolve the problem? The shortage is of people, of qualified GPs, so even if there are brand-new premises, without the doctors to see the patients, the problem he is talking about is not solved.

Andrew Selous: This is the benefit of having former members of the Cabinet in a debate such as this: they know what they are talking about. My right hon. Friend is completely right. We are talking about capital and ongoing revenue funding. Those new residents come with a stream of tax revenue—their council tax, their income tax and the tax from their businesses, which they will pay—so we are not asking for anything unreasonable; it is about an equitable allocation given where people live, when there are big increases in the local population.

In my local authority, there were proposals to build four health hubs. The original commitment was that those would be built by 31 March 2020, then by 2024, and we have one being built, another progressing, and complete silence on the other two. Initially, the funding was due to come from the primary care infrastructure fund, then the primary care transformation fund, with the CCG and the local authority due to make contributions at various points—but none of those routes has led to the delivery of two much-needed health hubs in my constituency.

I propose that there should be guaranteed primary care health funding for each 1,000 new homes, allocated at the time planning permission is granted and delivered as the new residents arrive, although smaller developments must also be catered for.

The current capitation figures, based on the Office for National Statistics population figures, always lag. Therefore, the infrastructure always comes too late,

leaving unacceptable strain on local primary care services. We will, in the end, pay for the primary care services needed but, instead of always doing it too late, let us get ahead of the curve and stop the anxiety and upset that our constituents and primary care staff experience as a result.

I observe that the process is often shrouded in secrecy, with very little engagement with local Members of Parliament and councillors. We are the ones who feel the anger of our residents when these facilities arrive too late, but there is limited local accountability from those taking the decisions, and a confused and uncertain national funding process. We could learn from the way education funding is allocated to accommodate significant population growth. I recommend that the Prime Minister urgently convene a Cabinet Sub-Committee between the Treasury, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to deal with the issue once and for all.

I repeat the point I made to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers). I understand that the new infrastructure levy may come to our rescue, but if it just looks forward and does not deal with these vast new housing estates—14,000 homes being built in my constituency and many thousands in the constituencies of colleagues here—we will have let down our constituents. Our country generally does public administration well; we are better than this and can fix it. I implore the Minister to go back to his Secretary of State to have a focused, cross-Government effort, led by the Prime Minister, to get this right once and for all.

9.42 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in a debate in Westminster Hall, and today I basically support what the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) has put forward. I always give the perspective from Northern Ireland. What is happening there mirrors what the hon. Gentleman has introduced, and I thank him for setting the scene so well.

Access to GPs would probably make a debate on its own. I think we could all give myriad examples of where the system is failing. I know that Northern Ireland is not the responsibility of the Minister, but I want to add weight to what the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire said. I am convinced that others, including the shadow Minister, will also mirror that. We could all speak for ages about access to GPs, but I will fight the urge to spend my time discussing the disgraceful routine that too many practices have adopted of withholding face-to-face appointments, and the problems caused, including with house calls to vulnerable patients.

One of my constituents, who uses a wheelchair, was the only family member to have covid. Her carers and the district nurse expressed concern about sores on her legs, because she is a type 1 diabetic. Her GP refused the call-out and asked an 80-year-old woman to WhatsApp a photograph. My goodness, how ridiculous! Not to be disrespectful, but the lady has no idea what a WhatsApp photograph is or how to take one. That says more about the GP, who has not understood the issues. It seems I did not resist the urge well, but I remain infuriated at the abject dereliction of duty that GP practices continue

to hold fast to. That was one example, but many other GPs, as referred to by the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, do it right and do their best to help people, as they should.

I will not say any more about that at this stage, because it is not the purpose of this debate. I want to talk about the other part of the debate, which we need to take steps to address. We need to ensure that enough thought is put into not simply whether the roads can handle the additional pressure from large-scale housing developments but whether community GPs and pharmacies can handle it as well.

My GP cannot take another patient without expanding. I have been with that practice for all my life. It has expanded once and will expand again—a planning application is pending—within its property because there is room to do that. It is not the same in every case, but we need flexibility for that in the planning process. To back up what the hon. Gentleman said, I will give an example of where the process fails badly—I know that my area is not the Minister's responsibility—and there does not seem to be any vision or idea of how to do it the right way.

I live in a village between Greyabbey and Kircubbin, and patient numbers in the GP surgeries in Kircubbin are growing, so an extension has been accepted by the trust and will go ahead. There is money to invest in that surgery as well. I know that is not the Minister's responsibility, but this ties in with what the hon. Gentleman said: we need funding from the Minister's sister Department in Northern Ireland, the Department of Health, to ensure that moneys are there to help with those extensions.

A local doctor's surgery in Newtownards has a wonderful idea, similar to that described by the hon. Gentleman and what he wants to see for his constituency. It is currently based above a pharmacy, and its vision is to expand. It put in an application to build a further three rooms for a physiotherapist, a nutritionist and a mental health nurse so that, when someone goes to their clinic to see their GP, they can do almost everything. That would take the pressure off the NHS—or the HSC as it is in Northern Ireland. It is important to have a strategy in place. I was incredibly impressed by that vision and drive for my constituency, which is like the vision to which the hon. Gentleman referred. That could address the needs of the adolescent having difficulty with their relationship with food, the needs of the grieving widower by giving them something other than anti-depressants and making sure that they always have a face-to-face consultation, and the needs of the overweight working mother who needs an adaptive plan to help her achieve her goals in her busy life. That is not a criticism but a fact of life—it happens sometimes. However, the planners turned down the application.

The planners did not have the vision or the strategy to see how important it was to have a better surgery and a better clinic, so a project that could provide a benefit was turned down. Where is the planners' vision? Where is the co-operation between the health departments and the housing and planning departments? I do not see that in this application and I feel greatly aggrieved. I will fight the issue—I intend to take it as far as I can, along with others—because it infuriates me. The planners look at it as a tick-box exercise and think, "It doesn't do this and it doesn't do that," and yet this is the place for the project. There is room to do it on site, so why not let it take place?

The choice for the GP service is to move out of town or simply to carry on as it is, which will not meet the needs of the practice, with the growing numbers coming. We need fully serviced practices and must be able to host them. We must also ensure that large-scale developments recognise that integral need of the community and address this issue. It is no longer enough to tick the box and build a play park when people need access to GPs in their areas. To continue to ignore that will only move concerns down the line.

I see the Minister in his place and know that he is consistently interested and committed to the change that the hon. Gentleman is asking for and that others will ask for. I am confident that he will respond positively—he always does, as that is in his very nature—so I will be pleased to hear his response.

On 2 November 2021, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care acknowledged that the Government were not on track to meet their plans to recruit an additional 6,000 GPs by 2024—that is not a criticism but an observation of his comments—and the Government had a manifesto commitment to expand the number of other primary care professionals by 26,000. How can we entice young people to be doctors when they go for work experience in poky offices and are inundated with unsafe patient numbers, and when GPs tell them to run? The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) referred to that and to some of the issues.

That situation will only continue, and the Minister can respond in a positive fashion only if he has co-operation from the Health Department to make things happen; we need a two-pronged attack on this one. Do we, as I would like to see and as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire said, invest in practices now and entice medical students into seeing that the dream of holistic general practice is a reality? That vision of a future in which we can do better and look after more people in a focused way is what I would like to see and what I think everybody else wants to see as well.

Having specifically designed facilities is key to that aim. That is why the application in Newtownards addresses a number of things, which are all part of what comes to a GP every day. That GP surgery and clinic is in the centre of Newtownards. It is accessible; there is car parking. It is right in the middle of the town. It makes more sense to let it do what it wants to do within the room that it has on site, but the planners do not want that to happen. There is no vision, no strategy, no co-operation with the Health Department and no helping to address the issue.

Therefore I find myself fully supporting the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, and I implore the Minister to make this initiative—although it is not his responsibility—UK-wide. What starts here can ripple out, like when a stone hits water, and when it gets to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, we can have some vision as well. I will send a copy of the *Hansard* record of this debate to the planning department in Newtownards and make it aware of my plea on behalf of the GP surgery there. Planners and healthcare commissioning groups alike should be legally obligated to abide by this initiative. They should have a strategy, a vision, and do it right. The future of our NHS depends on change, and this change is fit for every area. We must

[*Jim Shannon*]

move on this need now, before the implosion of general practice that is on the horizon and becoming ever clearer.

I again thank the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire. I look forward very much to other contributions and I look forward especially to hearing what the Minister has to say.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. We have seven more Back-Bench speakers. We will start the winding-up speeches no later than 10.38 am to give Mr Selous time for a two-minute response. There is no formal imposition of a time limit, but if colleagues could keep to about six minutes maximum, that would be best.

9.52 am

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) for securing a debate on this important issue this morning.

The Mayor of London wants 2,364 new flats and houses to be built in the borough of Barnet every year for years to come. I did a rough calculation for some of the bigger developments recently built, approved or pending in the planning system in my constituency alone, and the figure is nearly 4,000 units, with another 691 rejected but liable to come back on appeal or possibly with a revised proposal. That could mean anything up to about 9,000 people trying to find a place on a GP's list of patients. I pay tribute to all the GPs in my constituency. They are the bedrock of our NHS. We all depend on them, and they have done magnificently in so many ways during the pandemic.

It is clear that rising healthcare need is already placing great pressure on our national health service, including general practice, as we grow older as a society and as our frail elderly population gets larger. But at the same time, council planning committees are finding it harder and harder to turn down planning applications even where it is clear that the area does not have the GP capacity to service the population increase that the proposed new flats could involve. Elected councillors are increasingly advised by officers that they should not turn down an application even if it contravenes long-established planning principles on matters such as character, conservation, height, density or pressure on local services and infrastructure, because their decision could be overturned on appeal, on the grounds that housing targets are not being met. To compound the pressure, elected representatives are threatened with high costs being awarded against councils if they lose planning appeals. That is forcing councils to produce long lists of development sites to meet the requirement of a five-year land supply, many of which may be wholly inappropriate for new housing—certainly high-density new housing. Even where developers offer to build facilities for a new GP practice as part of their plan, that does not solve the problem, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire, because it is a shortage of doctors, not premises, that is causing the greatest pressure on primary care.

My hon. Friend clearly articulated a solution in his speech, but I would like the Minister to consider a threefold solution. First, housing targets should be advisory, not mandatory. They should not be taken into account in planning decisions or appeals. Secondly, whether or not a local authority has a five-year land supply should no longer determine planning applications. Thirdly, we need to accelerate efforts to train, recruit and retain more family doctors. The Government take the expansion of the NHS workforce very seriously, and it is a proud achievement that there are more doctors in hospitals than ever before in the long history of our national health service. The Government have ensured that there are more GPs in training than ever before, and five new medical schools have opened. That good progress is all welcome, but as the Health Secretary has admitted, plans to recruit 6,000 additional GPs by 2024 are not on track. We need to turn that situation around if we are to tackle the covid backlog and ensure that, where new homes are built, all residents—existing ones and new ones—continue to be able to access the GP appointments they need.

I hope the Minister will set out the care improvements delivered by the £250 million package announced last year to relieve immediate pressures on GP practice. I hope he will also give us the latest numbers on the recruitment of other professionals, such as nurses and pharmacists, to support GPs as part of multidisciplinary practices. Will he commit the Government to redoubling their efforts to plan effectively for the future workforce needs of our national health service?

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Thank you for your remarks and for keeping within the advisory time limit.

9.57 am

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on securing a very popular debate. I declare that I am still a borough councillor for Charnwood Borough Council, which I will refer to. I am also the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for district councils.

As the Minister can see, he has many friends on the Government Benches, but we suffer some frustrations, and I look to him for advice and assistance. We have two main frustrations: one he can clearly do something about, and the other we need his help with in tackling with the Department for Health and Social Care. We have GP contracts and the related health profile, and we have planning law—and never the twain shall meet, it would seem. I would like to do something about that.

I would like to be able to support housing developments where they are appropriate and needed and of the size and type required for the local area. More importantly, I want local communities to be created. Three thousand houses in one place is a village, not a housing estate, and I would like to create communities with proper infrastructure. I would also like to support my GPs and constituents. I have had many meetings with GPs in my constituency over recent months. They have worked incredibly hard, particularly during covid. We talk about going to see “our GP” an awful lot, rather than going to see a medical professional in a medical centre, perhaps run by a GP. There is something that needs to be done there.

In my constituency, I could talk about the village of Sileby, which has grown hugely, or about Loughborough or Mountsorrel, but I will talk about Shepshed and west Loughborough. The town of Shepshed has grown enormously over recent years, with the addition of thousands of houses. In the Garendon estate, right next door in west Loughborough, 3,000 homes are due to be built. There are two GP surgeries in the whole area and so, whatever they try to do, the situation is completely unsustainable.

I have talked to the clinical commissioning group and the local health service. Everybody is keen to do something, but there is a definite reluctance, because of the risk factor. There is less incentive to run a GP surgery than to just work in one or be a locum; there is a lot of risk involved. We need to take that into account; we need to consider the cost and the risk of extending a GP surgery or starting a new one.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) spoke about the lack of a five-year housing land supply. That is absolutely crippling my constituency. We need to stop indiscriminate development that has no forward planning. Planning staff in the council work hard on local plans—they are looking forward to 2036—and on delivery, but without a five-year land supply, it is impossible. The intentions are good but in practice we are not delivering in Loughborough.

The Conservative manifesto stated:

“Infrastructure first: We will amend planning rules so that the infrastructure—roads, schools, GP surgeries—comes before people move into new homes.”

We must do that. The housing infrastructure fund has not created the atmosphere and the momentum we were expecting. I would like to see more.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire on the recommendation as regards the number of patients per GP. I also ask the Minister to consider age profiles. The people who live in the Shepshed area have an older age profile and, generally speaking, older patients need GP surgeries more.

We need cultural change—a shift towards seeing a nurse or another professional in a medical centre, not necessarily having a face-to-face appointment with a GP. We absolutely must start five-year land supply. I would also like to see feasibility studies and infrastructure funded up front, either by the developer or through the fund, so that feasibility studies of GP surgeries do not require GPs to stump up the money first.

10.3 am

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on securing the debate. He and I got talking a few weeks ago because I asked a question at Prime Minister's questions too. In it, I gave some figures about the growth in my constituency. The largest town, Didcot, is set to be 42% larger in 2027 than it was just a decade earlier. Wantage and Grove, the second largest area, is set to be 59% larger than it was just a decade earlier. Thousands of houses are also being built in the other two towns, Faringdon and Wallingford, and in the 64 villages I represent. My hon. Friend and I decided we would be better combining forces and working with other colleagues, as the issues we face are similar.

People know what the growth figures mean: it is harder and harder to get a GP appointment. It is a separate issue to the post-covid debate on face-to-face, telephone appointments or an e-consultation. This issue is much longer running. It is also distinct from the 6,000 GPs and 26,000 other primary care staff that the Government have committed to recruiting, which I warmly welcome.

It should go without saying—although I will say it anyway—that our GPs and primary care staff work incredibly hard. They want a solution to the problem as much as anybody else, because they are working flat out and are presented with more and more patients. I have a surgery in Wallingford that actually closed its books recently because it simply cannot take any more patients.

Depending on what measure we look at, different parts of my constituency look the worst, but Didcot ranks lowest on the measure of permanent qualified GPs. Didcot is a good example, because we have had a development there called Great Western Park, which is 3,500 houses. On the basis that 2.4 people live in every house, 8,400 people have been added to the constituency, and they have now been waiting seven years for the GP surgery that was promised with the development. There is still no sign of it, but what they do know is coming is Valley Park right next to them—4,200 more houses, and a further 9,600 people. That is 18,000 people just in those two developments, but there is no prospect at the moment of additional GP surgeries.

Who is accountable? Part of the problem is that it is very unclear. Many people think it must be the Government, and of course it is partly down to the Government and the rules for infrastructure not keeping up with house building. As hon. Members have said, there is a difference between what the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Treasury want. Of course that is true, but the provision of GP surgeries is also down to councils and what they do with the section 106 money and community infrastructure levy that they are given. It is also down to the developers and the promises they make, the CCGs and how they plan for things, and the national planning bodies such as NHS England and Health Education England. Part of the problem is that there is no directly responsible body that can ensure that people get the services they need.

There is no shortage of people wanting to be medical students. I used to work in social mobility, and studying medicine is one of the most popular things that young people want to do. The issue is partly the diversity of the people who get into it: only 6% of doctors are from a working-class background, and someone is 24 times more likely to be a doctor if a parent is a doctor. I cannot help but feel that we are missing out on a talent pool of people who want to be doctors, yet we do not have enough GPs.

A number of Members have made important points about the things we need to do. Of course, it is not just about GPs. Lots of things I campaign on are about infrastructure—reopening Grove station, improving the A420 and A34, having more school places and so on—but there are three things that I would draw attention to. First, we need the infrastructure before the houses go in. In this case, that means knowing precisely who will run the GP surgery and having them signed up with the contract to do so before we start. We recognise that

[David Johnston]

most GP surgeries are private businesses. It should not be as difficult as it is to get somebody committed and to know what we will do with the money.

The second point is that I am not persuaded that we should not have a limit on the number of patients that a GP or practice should have. It would be extraordinary in other fields if we did not have a limit on the number of people that we thought was suitable. I totally accept that areas are very different, but surely we can have an upper limit that triggers additional services once it has been reached or exceeded, as it clearly has been in my constituency.

The third point is about the talent pool. We have shortages of all sorts of things in this country, but a lot of people want to study medicine and we are not using them. We could be much better at recruiting people.

We will not solve this problem today, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, but if we want people to not feel that houses are a curse on their local area, they need to know that their quality of life will not decline. That means putting in the right infrastructure, particularly GP surgeries.

10.9 am

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my county colleague and hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on securing the debate. He will know that this is a particular issue for Bedfordshire.

In my own constituency over the course of the last decade, the town of Biggleswade, the village of Stotfold and the newly parished area of Fairfield Park have been dramatically transformed by housing growth. In many instances, that has created very welcome, happy communities and neighbourhoods for people, which have grown and become a natural part of the environment; but we cannot ignore the pace of growth and the impact that it has had on those residents new to the area, and on the existing residents who have accepted the additional growth in their areas.

Two issues make for happy communities. First, is the pace of growth sustainable and are the services there that people come to expect from the Government, in terms of school places and, as we are discussing today, of GPs?

My constituency is growing at a rate of about five times the national average. Between 2015 and 2020, the population of this country grew by about 1.9 million people. If all constituencies grew at the same pace as mine, there would be over 5 million new people in this country. I ask the Minister, when it comes to housing, could we please consider an absolute cap on what local communities are expected to have in any long period of time? If we do not have that pressure against market forces, I fear that we are building some concerns for the future.

I know that Conservative colleagues—replete in their number here today—have a large number of questions about planning reforms. I would just say this to the Minister. The previous Secretary of State focused, I think rightly, on the efficiency of the process of planning: how do we get more houses built? That is important.

Will the Minister also focus on how effective the planning is for the communities where those houses are built? If we have that slight nuance in the approach on planning, I think that would be helpful.

Of course, I come today not to bury the Minister, but to praise him; because he knows that his colleague in, I think, June 2021, in response to a debate that I called on housing growth in my constituency, killed the 1 million housing target that was in the Labour peer Lord Adonis's housing target for the Ox-Cam arc. The Minister also knows that his Department, under the new Secretary of State, has said that it wishes to de-emphasise—to flush away—the Ox-Cam arc, which Lord Adonis, the Labour peer, was using as his Trojan horse to build a million houses in the play spaces of Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire. It is welcome that those changes were made, so I want to put on record my thanks to the Minister and ask him to make sure that we follow through to ensure that unreasonable targets are not placed on councils in the Ox-Cam arc area.

The Minister also knows that his colleague said that he would arrange meetings for me with the Department for Education for school places and with the Department of Health and Social Care on GP places. I am grateful to the Department for allowing that meeting to take place with school places; we had a very good meeting with the Department for Education, but I am interested to learn more from the NHS. I am completing a survey of GPs and around June this year will have the opportunity to present a report. Will the Minister follow up on that with his colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that I get access to the Secretary of State when that report is ready?

I just want to make a couple of points on GPs, if I may. As many colleagues have said, I know that people are frustrated that they cannot get access, but they should know that their GPs are working very hard. I would make this point: abuse is never acceptable when people contact their GP surgery. People should hold back. Don't go all Will Smith, right?—don't go all Will Smith when you call your GP surgery. Make sure you take that extra breath when you talk, because the people you are talking to are under considerable pressure.

We need to look at the GP partner model. I know there are many who would like to say that that model is an oddity in the new world. No, it is not. Entrepreneurship and the idea of running your own business has its place in primary care. We need to make sure that we open up and broaden the way in which we give people access to primary care. We have to recognise that GP access is a bottleneck in the system. I fully support infrastructure first, but the answer is not always more people. Often, it is more efficient processes with the existing people, or new avenues for people to access the care.

Will the Minister go back to his colleagues, as he considers GP practice and housing growth, and say, "Please make more progress on giving people the power to understand how they can access primary care"? We are making good progress with the NHS app, but it is an NHS app designed for us that actually looks like it was designed for doctors; it is very hard to make effective consumer decisions using the app. I ask the Minister to broaden the access for people to get into primary care through chemists and other facilities, and to please move forward with diagnostic centres.

10.15 am

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on securing this important debate. The provision for affordable housing and access to good healthcare are among the top issues raised with me by constituents in Truro and Falmouth in Cornwall. Those issues must be tackled in conjunction. I thank all the GPs and primary healthcare professionals in my constituency who have been working so hard over the last few years—as they always do.

I recognise people's concern about the impact of large-scale developments on local services. That is why we must increase the provision of affordable housing while keeping in mind that for local communities to accept the new housing developments, new developments must be supported by health infrastructure. In the right place, large-scale developments can not only ease the housing crisis but act as a catalyst for reforming and tackling health issues and inequalities. We need to ensure that large developments can provide those opportunities.

Primary care delivery always requires funding, a physical site and willing providers. Those providers are GPs, which are generally private businesses and differ in their capacity. They will also differ in the demographic that they serve. Large-scale developments should be able to assist with that funding, and we must continue to ensure that local planning authorities can enforce that through mechanisms such as section 106 and the community infrastructure levy. I am pleased the Government have committed to further reform in that area, including proposals in the levelling-up White Paper for a new infrastructure levy that will enable local authorities to capture value from development much more efficiently. However, I echo the call of others that co-ordination with the Department of Health and Social Care is an utterly sensible way forward.

Developers can also provide physical sites by reserving land to deliver health services. I am pleased that developers for the controversial Langarth Garden Village in my constituency, which will eventually provide up to 10,000 new homes, are committed to doing the right thing and have secured, through the planning system and with the council's involvement, permission to develop a new health infrastructure. I would like to thank, since he is in the Chamber, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson), for providing a new free school on the north coast of Cornwall that will, in part, deliver school places for that very controversial new estate in my constituency.

The health infrastructure plans include a new health and wellbeing centre embedded in the Langarth community, a state-of-the-art health hub to provide a one-stop shop that includes GPs and primary care treatment as well as other health facilities that have been mentioned today, such as a dentists, a pharmacy and diagnostic services to reduce pressure on existing local services. However, it is important that we remember that GPs are a private business, and as such the Government must create the right conditions to ensure they can supply and maintain that service.

In Cornwall we have a housing crisis and a health and social care crisis. We have mentioned today that solutions to the two crises come together—one absolutely affects

the other. GP surgeries in Cornwall frequently report that they are short-staffed; they have offered jobs across the entire health service in Cornwall, but people cannot take the work because they cannot find housing. That applies to any kind of healthcare worker, right up to consultant level, but certainly applies to GPs and dentists. We must ensure that key workers from both the public and private sectors can buy and rent affordably in the area. I would like more key worker housing to be set aside in the Langarth development.

Key workers are vital, but they tend to earn less than the national average, have fewer assets and have more limited choices about where they can work. That means that they find it harder to get on to the property ladder or to rent decent homes close to where they need to work. It is worth mentioning that the Langarth development is very close to our hospital. I would also like to see more one-level, one-front-door properties in the development for our growing elderly population. Let us create communities where they need to be. I am pleased that the Government have already taken several steps to ensure that we meet the needs of key workers in local communities, including the 30% discount under the First Homes scheme or the assistance available under Help to Buy. However, even with those schemes in place, many key workers struggle to get on the housing ladder, and there is a huge shortage in Cornwall.

There are various options available to the Government; I will mention a few. In areas with key worker staff shortages, local authorities and housing associations should consider giving greater priority to local key workers in their respective allocations and lettings policies. In addition, the Government's future affordable housing funding programmes should prioritise allocating grant funding to affordable housing schemes in which a significant proportion of homes are reserved for key workers. It is especially relevant to places such as Cornwall, where we are on a peninsula and cannot borrow key workers from other local authorities.

It is clear that new housing developments must be supported by the appropriate health infrastructure. Developers can help to provide funding for sites, but GPs and other health providers supply the service and we must do more to ensure that those workers can afford to buy or rent near their place of work.

10.20 am

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) for securing this really important debate.

Being able to access GP services is an incredibly important issue for my constituents. In fact, I receive almost as much correspondence on that issue as I do any other topic, and my constituents have expressed a real frustration with the difficulty of being able to secure a local appointment with their GP, as well as not being able to see their GP face to face as much as they would like. I appreciate that this is no fault of the GPs themselves, and I would like to put on record my thanks and pay tribute to all the GPs across my constituency, who have done an extraordinary job over the past 24 months—and indeed also worked incredibly hard before that, and continue to do so.

[Robbie Moore]

I recently met some GPs from the Modality Partnership, who told me that much more needs to be done if we are to deliver the level and provision of service that the public so desperately want. It is clear that approving large-scale housing developments will only make the problems worse, when we allow the housing developments to take place with no thought to increasing healthcare services by providing physical facilities and revenue expenditure for employing and recruiting more GPs. That is currently a big concern for many of my constituents, right across Keighley and Ilkley.

Only last year, the Labour-run Bradford Council proposed in its draft local plan to increase the number of houses to be built right across my community by 3,000. That includes 314 new houses in Ilkley and Ben Rhydding; 181 new houses in Addingham; 188 houses in Steeton and Eastburn; 191 houses in Riddlesden; and 204 houses in Haworth and Cross Roads—I could go on. In the context of this debate, those proposals will have a damaging impact on the numerous GP services and facilities that many constituents are still finding it very difficult to access.

We can look at Long Lee, a small community on the outskirts of Keighley, where Bradford Council proposes in its local plan to build an extra 236 new houses. That will have an extra damaging impact on the local GP practice, which is already at capacity. Luckily, a recent housing application for that area was postponed; I can only hope that local healthcare provision will be a vital consideration when that housing application is put forward to the committee again.

In Silsden, the town is currently facing many housing developments, including from Barratt Homes, Linden Homes, Skipton Properties, and Countrywide, with an application that has recently been put forward. More recently, a 140-unit proposal has been put forward by Persimmon Homes, which is a live application. The town is being inundated and services just cannot cope. The town is being asked to put up with too many houses when the local healthcare provision cannot cope as it is already at capacity. It is completely wrong, and something must be done.

I commend the work being done by Silsden's District Councillor Rebecca Whitaker, who is leading the fight against these proposals and standing up for our local services. I am supportive of the work being done by my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), who has, as the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, launched an inquiry into local GP provision. I wholeheartedly hope that that inquiry looks at how we can make sure that expenditure is put into both capital and revenue in order to get better facilities put in place, and also that recruitment for GPs and GP services is given as much emphasis as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire made the important point that when planning applications are being considered, local healthcare service providers should have a statutory duty and responsibility to have a say in those applications, so that we can ensure that capacity is delivered for healthcare at a local level. When local authorities put forward their draft local plan, there should be an onus on them to have at least a conversation, but also to explore the facts about where capacity lies beforehand. In my area, when Bradford

Council put forward their draft local plan last year, it had not even looked at the capacity available within local healthcare facilities. That cannot be acceptable.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston), I make the point about where accountability sits and whether it lies with the Government, local authorities, GP services, local communities or housing developers when applications come forward. In summary, it is vital that we acknowledge these issues, as we cannot continue this endless cycle of allowing large-scale housing developments or additional housing to be built in small communities, producing a dramatic impact, without any acknowledgment of general practice capacity.

10.26 am

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on securing this incredibly important debate. The debate brings together two of the biggest categories of complaints that I receive in my constituency: housing development and GP services.

The town of Aylesbury has been expanding for more than 50 years. Indeed, the area of Bedgrove, where my parents had their first home together and where they took me home as their newborn son, more than 50 years ago, was built on the site of a farm, and many more farms and green spaces have been subsumed by housing developments in the ensuing half century—Walton Court in the 1970s, Quarrendon and Watermead in the 1980s and Fairford Leys in the 1990s and early 2000s. All have attracted many more people to make their homes in the proud county town of Buckinghamshire. With each new development, new pressures have been placed on existing communities and the infrastructure that serves them. Key among those services is the provision of healthcare, especially GP surgeries.

I want to be clear that neither I nor my constituents are opposed to development. We recognise that the next generation needs somewhere to live, and Aylesbury is a fine place to choose. However, since 2000, more than 16,000 homes have been added to the town. The newly approved local plan will add that same number again. The people who come to live in those new homes need excellent local services. They need road and rail connections, such as the Aylesbury link road and the Aylesbury spur. They need schools with enough spaces for all the children living locally. Crucially, they need sufficient healthcare provision, particularly at primary level. Yet GP surgeries in my constituency are already at breaking point.

Like other hon. Members present, one of the most familiar refrains I hear from residents is that they simply cannot get an appointment to see their doctor. In recent months, I have visited several GP surgeries not only to thank the hardworking doctors, nurses and, crucially, receptionists for their incredible work during the pandemic, but to hear first hand about the challenges they are experiencing. Top of their list is that there is simply not enough capacity to deal with all the patients who need care.

Meadowcroft surgery is a good example of the pressures that population growth can have on towns like Aylesbury. The surgery opened in 1964 to serve what was then the new Quarrendon estate. It moved to a new site at Jackson Road in 1992, with 8,000 patients on the list. Today that list stands at more than 16,000, and will

grow to more than 26,000 when the surgery moves to another new site in Paradise Orchard later this year, following a merger.

For more than a decade, residents in the south of Aylesbury in Stoke Mandeville and Weston Turville have been opposed to a new development on a greenfield site called Hampden Fields. The Hampden Fields Action Group is extremely concerned that the development will have inadequate healthcare provision. Their fears are completely understandable, given that another area—Kingsbrook—is yet to have a new surgery 10 years after its construction.

It is just plain common sense that new housing developments need to include healthcare provision. GP surgeries and all that they now include—such as paramedics, pharmacists and, of course, nurses—are absolutely critical to that provision. We must ensure that buildings for these facilities are core to the design and planning of large-scale new housing developments, and we must also remember that we do not just need the premises; we need the people as well. So we need to ensure that we have enough young people training to join the health service across the full range of its professions, with courses such as those at Buckinghamshire New University, Buckinghamshire College Group and Buckinghamshire University Technical College all providing that critical first step.

We must consider retention as well as recruitment, so that people living in those housing developments will still have excellent healthcare provision in 10, 20 and 30 years' time. And we must not forget that primary healthcare can result in referral to secondary healthcare. GPs send some of their patients to hospital, and that route must not be neglected either, when we consider housing development on a scale such as we are seeing in Aylesbury.

It cannot be left to a random soup of acronyms—section 106, CIL and HIF—to make all of that necessary provision. What we need is a strategic, considered plan that can be delivered fairly and transparently. And within that plan, we probably need to consider novel ways of financing infrastructure, so that we get it at a much earlier stage—before all the houses are sold and when the developers are prepared to pay.

Today's debate is an important and welcome opportunity to highlight how crucial healthcare is to the British people as we tackle the burgeoning demand for new homes. I hope that the Minister's response will serve to reassure existing and future residents of Aylesbury that the Government understand the challenge and are set to meet it head-on.

10.31 am

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd.

I genuinely think that this has been a valuable debate about an important issue. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on securing it and on the typically clear and powerful remarks he made in opening it. He has been raising concerns about this issue for a considerable period, and the fact that he felt compelled to secure this debate today only serves, I am afraid to say, to highlight the startling lack of progress on the part of the Government in addressing those concerns.

The concerns are not the hon. Gentleman's alone; indeed, this issue is not confined to his corner of Bedfordshire. His concerns are widely shared across the House. As the attendance for today's debate makes clear, they are keenly felt among Government Members in particular. I thank all the Members who have contributed this morning.

Having heard today's contributions, we can only hope that the Minister will at least be convinced of the need to go away and revisit the fundamental aspects of a planning system that routinely fails to produce the necessary social infrastructure for new communities to thrive. We have heard lots of complaints and points of contention today, but it is within the Government's gift to take action on many of the issues that have been raised. I hope that the Minister will go away with renewed vigour to address them.

The focus of this morning's debate has been on the provision of primary care services for large-scale housing developments. I add my praise to the general expressions of support that have been conveyed today to GPs and GP practice staff. That we face significant challenges as a country when it comes to primary care capacity is not in dispute. The reasons for that shortage are complex, and when it comes to problems such as the recruitment and retention of enough GPs to accommodate rising patient demand or how local health services plan for population growth in service provision, those are obviously the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Care. However, there is no question in my mind but that the planning system is exacerbating the crisis in primary care, particularly in areas experiencing significant development, by failing to deliver new facilities in places where the needs of large-scale new communities cannot be met simply by the expansion of existing sites.

The particular concern of the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire and others who have spoken this morning is general practice capacity, but the national failure to ensure that all new large-scale housing developments have adequate primary care provision is mirrored in other forms of infrastructure, whether that be school places or transport, as the hon. Members for Wantage (David Johnston), for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) and others have remarked upon. Having that infrastructure is absolutely key to gaining local consent, which is an essential part of the planning process.

I do not think that this issue is primarily one of housing supply. There is a housing crisis and we need to address it, but the crux of this issue is the need for up-front infrastructure investment before or at the point that a large-scale residential development completes and new residents move in. However, the planning system as it currently operates—and I think Conservative Members will accept this—is simply not geared up to facilitate that infrastructure-first approach on all major sites; all too often, no one has overall responsibility for place-making.

The importance of master developers was clearly identified in the Letwin review: they strategically assemble land, secure the necessary permissions, co-ordinate the delivery of the infrastructure and de-risk the development process as a matter of course. Without those developers, the system incentivises volume house builders to build often poor-quality housing in inappropriate and often entirely car-dependent locations, in a way that frequently

[Matthew Pennycook]

leads to intractable disputes about how core infrastructure and services will be delivered and who will pay for them. Ultimately, the fact that the planning system lacks many of the features necessary to support effective large-scale housing growth stems from the failure of central Government to take a clear strategic role in the delivery of new large-scale communities.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire and others drew attention to the inadequacies of the housing infrastructure fund, and they were right to do so. The fund can and does support the delivery of infrastructure on sites where viability is an issue and address the need for up-front infrastructure and the problem of risk on a limited number of sites. However, because it distributes funding on a competitive, ad hoc basis, it is not a general solution for the infrastructure needs of all large-scale housing developments.

Homes England could play a far larger role in providing local authorities with support and assisting local partners directly with delivery, land acquisition and the master developer role. It has extensive legal powers that allow it to take on that role and obtain land by means of compulsory purchase. It could be the instrument the Government use to support large-scale growth with the necessary social and transport infrastructure. However, that would depend on the Government having a strategy; at present, I am afraid, they do not. Although there are exceptions, in general terms it is simply a fact that central Government in England do not play a clear strategic role in site identification or the delivery of new large-scale communities.

The national infrastructure strategy sets out a range of investment priorities, but it does not provide a framework that makes clear which areas are preferred for long-term priority housing growth and their relationship to infrastructure investment. National planning policy on delivering sustainable, large-scale housing developments is incredibly vague and provides little in the way of encouragement or guidance to local authorities contemplating meeting local housing need in key strategic locations.

The Conservative Administration of the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) changed the law in 2018 to encourage locally led development corporations to act as master developers. However, to the best of my knowledge—the Minister may correct me—none has yet been designated.

In many ways, the root cause of the infrastructure challenges on sites such as those that have been mentioned today is the issue of land value capture. Aside from direct Government grant, development of those sites is reliant on developer contributions in the form of section 106 or the community infrastructure levy to meet essential infrastructure needs. However, those contributions are often not sufficient to provide all the infrastructure needed on those sites. I am surprised that this has not been mentioned today, but that is at least partly a direct consequence of the impact of viability rules set out in the 2012 national planning policy framework, which allow developers to game the system and drive down section 106 contributions. Although in some cases local authorities could be more robust with developers, the national planning policy framework ties their hands behind their backs in terms of what they can extract as public gains under section 106.

The Minister will no doubt point to the Government's proposals, mentioned most recently in the levelling-up White Paper, to introduce a new infrastructure levy. However, at present, we have no idea how it would apply to large-scale development or deal with areas of low demand, how much it would yield or the date by which we can expect it to be implemented. There is an immediate deficit, as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire said in his opening remarks.

Given how heavily the Government appear to be leaning on the new levy as a means to secure affordable housing and the infrastructure communities need, perhaps the Minister might give us a sense of what the new levy will look like, what form it will take and when it will be brought before the House for consideration. Indeed, he might even go so far as to give Members a straight answer to the more fundamental question of whether the Government still intend to legislate for a reform of the planning system in this Parliament.

To conclude, this debate has highlighted a problem that is not confined to a handful of sites or to particular parts of England, but is the inevitable outcome of the current planning system, which does not provide the necessary social and transport infrastructure on major sites as a matter of course. Addressing that problem requires a fundamental change of approach on the part of the Government, not just tinkering around the edges with individual infrastructure funding streams.

Real benefits can be gained if the Department is willing to grapple seriously with the problem, not only in delivering a marked increase in housing supply but in terms of the quality and sustainability of the new communities that could be created. The alternative is that we continue to see more poor-quality housing in inappropriate locations without the necessary infrastructure that residents need to flourish. Members across the House do not want to see that outcome, and I suspect the Minister does not want to see it either, but do the Government have the political will to re-examine the flawed system that they are currently presiding over?

10.40 am

The Minister for Housing (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I cannot think of a better way to start my day than by spending it with my colleagues. I offer my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) my congratulations and thanks for securing this important debate. As the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) said, it has been useful and wide ranging. Hon. Members will understand that I may not be able to answer a number of questions about health here and now, but I will address some of the points that have been mentioned.

My hon. Friend has been a tireless campaigner for increasing access to GPs for his constituents. I know that he and everyone here wants our constituents to have timely appointments when they need them, and I am sure that everyone will agree that waiting weeks to see a GP is simply unacceptable.

When there is a growing population and a growing supply of new homes, it falls to Government to ensure that local services are not overburdened. Part of the problem is that in the past new development has not always been accompanied by real-world improvements in local infrastructure to serve the new community.

When new homes are built, roads feel busier, schools appear to be over-subscribed and appointments for local surgeries and other healthcare provision are harder to book—I see that across my own constituency of Pudsey, Horsforth and Aireborough. It is an issue that often pits communities against new development because, too often, people feel that planning is something that happens to them, not something in which they are engaged. That needs to change and I say to all colleagues here that I get it.

We need to ensure that new homes automatically translate into new infrastructure, whether that be hospitals, GP practices, schools or parks and play areas, because they are all things that we rely on. I offer my praise to GPs who have worked incredibly hard in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) mentioned being kind to the staff at GP practices, which is an important message to relay.

It is important to say a few words about what should be happening, in order to reinforce the message to those who may be listening. Local plans are a way for areas to develop the communities they need. They are key to driving investment in the local area and securing the housing and jobs that our communities need. None the less, those plans should involve all the providers within those communities to ensure they are providing services to match the demands that new housing will bring.

Sir Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend is a thoughtful, considerate and diligent Minister, and I hope he will be able to answer my question. If he does not have the answer, perhaps he can look for inspiration from his officials. Is he able to inform us how many planning applications have been turned down over the last year, two years or whatever timescale the records cover, as a result of lack of provision for health capacity and the needs of GPs? My guess is that the answer is probably zero, and that in itself sends a message to developers that they can get away with not having to bother with this.

Stuart Andrew: I thank my right hon. Friend for asking such a specific question. I do not have those figures to hand, but I will ensure that I get them to him. He makes a very valid point, and I will come on to some of the things that we are looking at to address exactly his points.

I was talking about local plans, which provide certainty for communities, businesses and developers. An effective and up-to-date plan is essential not only to meet an area's housing requirements, but to create well-designed and attractive places to live, with the services that people need on their doorstep. We are already helping councils to put in place such robust and up-to-date plans. That includes encouraging visits from the Planning Inspectorate and specialist advice from the Planning Advisory Service to provide a range of specialist planning advice to councils throughout England.

Plans should be shaped by early, proportionate and effective engagement between plan makers and communities, local organisations, businesses, infrastructure providers and operators, and statutory consultees. They should seek to meet the development needs of their area, and that includes facilities that will be needed across health, schools and other areas. We recognise,

however, that more work is needed. We want all infrastructure providers, including healthcare providers, to be much more engaged in the plan making right from the outset, because that is clearly not happening enough, as we have heard in the evidence of colleagues today. We will come forward on how we will do that as part of our reforms in due course.

Local plans are not the only means of improving services and building that vital infrastructure. There are clear regulatory frameworks for local authorities and developers to follow. The national planning policy framework, for example, states that local plans should aim for sustainable development, which means that new schools, hospitals and local services such as GP practices should be factored in from the outset. Proposed development should be shaped by effective engagement with the local community, so that planners and developers know what is really needed. In some areas, it might be new roads, bridges or bus depots, but in others it will be new nurseries or GP surgeries. That engagement should extend to relevant health bodies too, such as NHS trusts and the clinical commissioning groups, to ensure that any development helps rather than hinders local strategies to improve health and wellbeing.

Local healthwatch organisations have a role to play. They have a firm grasp on the concerns of people who use health and social care services. My Department strongly encourages planning authorities to consult them when new homes are being built, so that they can raise those all-important questions on the number of GPs needed. Equally, to some extent local plans should head some of that off before houses are actually built. I have, however, listened to what colleagues have said—I hear it loud and clear. Put simply, if a GP surgery is right in the centre of town and a new development is on the outskirts, it is obviously better to ensure that a new surgery is built closer to the homes it will serve.

We have touched on some of the funding. Hon. Members are aware that councils obtain contributions through a community infrastructure levy on new development and by negotiating section 106 planning obligations with a developer. That helps to create funding not just for housing, but to address local infrastructure needs. In the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire, about £5.5 million has been allocated to healthcare provision through such funding, and that should be spent on helping to provide GP practices.

I recognise, however, that there is an issue here about which we need to do more. We hope that part of the effective planning reforms that we are to introduce will answer some of that. Our ambition has always been to simplify the system and to ensure that development becomes synonymous with improved services, and healthier and happier neighbourhoods. That is why we are exploring the introduction of a new infrastructure levy to replace the existing system of developer contributions.

At the moment, we plan for that new levy to be payable on completion of development. That will replace the negotiation and renegotiation that we keep seeing happen. The new levy will not be negotiable and will maximise land value, so we get more for local communities. It will also bring much greater certainty on costs, on factoring expenditure into the price paid for land and, in turn, on delivering more vital infrastructure. Under our proposals, local authorities would be allowed to

[*Stuart Andrew*]

borrow against infrastructure levy revenues so that they could bring forward vital improvements to services, including expanding GP capacity, before the first spade of a new development even hits the ground.

That said, I recognise that we need to test the policy. Many issues have been raised. I cannot at this moment commit my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to a meeting, but I will raise with him the suggestions and comments made today, and I will meet my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to raise the points made, to ensure that we are prioritising, gearing up and keeping focus, so that we can see what more can be done, and so that we do not miss the opportunity provided by the new fund to get the necessary infrastructure.

Matthew Pennycook: The Minister may not be able to answer, but may I tempt him to name the legislative vehicle by which the new infrastructure levy will be introduced?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Member will not have to wait too long before hearing which vehicle will be used; I hope it will be in a couple of weeks.

I want to touch on the issue of transparency. We have introduced infrastructure funding statements, which give people the opportunity to see what councils have done, but we can and must do more to give confidence to residents. That brings me on to community engagement.

As hon. Members will know, changes to the levy system are by no means the only improvement we want to bring to our planning system. One of the reasons why new development has not always been matched with tangible improvements to schools, nurseries or GP practices is that it has not always been easy for local residents to scrutinise applications or to make their voices heard. We need a faster, more responsive planning system, fit for the modern age. That means embracing digital technology and encouraging more residents to voice their views on what is being built in their community, and where.

I know that some of our previous proposals generated significant debate, to say the least, and it is therefore right that we paused for thought and took stock of different voices from across the planning sector and beyond, but on this ambition we are determined to make headway because we believe that it will result in more real-world improvements to services, which hon. Members all want to see.

My ministerial colleagues and I hope to announce a way forward soon so that the planning system supports our wider mission to level up communities in Bedfordshire and right across the country. The key point is that, at its heart, communities must be involved. Communities and neighbourhoods should be shaping the places in which they live, so that we have beautiful places with the necessary infrastructure and a democratic system that also considers environmental improvements. Neighbourhoods should have a big say in all of it.

Colleagues raised a number of other points. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) never misses an opportunity to raise housing targets with me. She knows from our conversations and meetings that I understand the issue. If she will allow me, I will come back to her in due course. My hon. Friend

the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) has also been quick off the mark to come to see me to discuss the issues in his constituency. Again, I understand them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough talked, quite rightly, about wanting to support new housing but that we should be building places where people want to live, not just huge dormitory estates. There has to be a sense of community. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) asked me to double up with the Secretary of State after his report—I will make sure that I do that for him.

I will see my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) later today to discuss the issue of second homes and its impact on those working in the public sector. I hope we will have a constructive meeting. My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) talked about towns I know well. My mother-in-law lives in Addingham, so I will get an earful from her if I do not get this right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) talked rightly about the stark increase—from 16,000 to 26,000—in the number of patients at his surgery. That is absolutely an area we need to look at carefully. He also talked about all of the different funds that are available. I think that that is one of the most confusing issues, and it is something that I would like to address as we go forward.

The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich, talked about the new levy. We are currently working with local authorities, providers and industry to ensure that the levy works for everybody.

In closing, I reiterate that I have heard loud and clear the concerns of hon. Members. The frustration of our constituents when large-scale new developments are green lit and local services become increasingly congested is palpable for us all. I hope I have clearly set out what we have already done to address that, through local plans, NPPF and section 106 agreements. I have also reiterated that we intend to go much further, by creating a more streamlined, smoother planning system, which levels up infrastructure and local services in every part of the country. I say to my hon. Friends that I am committed to working with all of them to ensure that we can make that vision a reality.

10.56 am

Andrew Selous: Let me start by offering my huge thanks to all colleagues who have taken the time and trouble to come here and be incredibly articulate on behalf of their communities, because this is clearly a common problem. We have heard from Members representing areas from Keighley to Cornwall and all points in between, and I know that colleagues from the north-west, Oxfordshire and many other places were not able to be here to tell the stories of their constituencies.

I have been reflecting on what the Minister has said. When he described the current system, I heard the word “should” a lot, but in moving to the new system of the infrastructure levy, that word must change to “must”. In far too many cases, “should” simply has not resulted in delivery. At the heart of it, I think we can do this according to the numbers. A GP and primary care team should be able to expect a safe limit based on the population in their area. A younger, healthier population

could have a larger limit, but a smaller patient load may be required in an area with an older, more disadvantaged population.

If we agree that there is a safe number of patients for a primary care team of GPs and practice staff, we can simply do it on the numbers and raise up those affected. When many more houses are built, we must have the additional capacity to serve those extra residents coming to the area. I hope that the infrastructure levy will provide everything we need, but when the Minister has that conversation with the Department of Health and Social Care, could he please invite the Treasury to that meeting as well? Quite frankly, if the infrastructure levy does not do the full job, we will have to go back to the Treasury. We will pay for this eventually, but we need to do it in a timely manner.

My final point is incredibly important. What the Minister is about to bring in must not just be future-looking. We all now have massive estates that are under-provisioned. He cannot just look to the future; he must deal with the current problem, which the existing system has allowed to get into a terrible state.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered general practice capacity for large-scale housing developments.

10.59 am

Sitting suspended.

Gambling-related Harm

[CHRISTINA REES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered gambling-related harm.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I am delighted to have secured this debate to talk about the urgent need for reform of the gambling laws. After two and half years of debates, reports and evidence sessions and, sadly, years of harm, addiction and ultimately loss of life, I was pleased to hear the Minister last week confirm that the publication of the long-awaited White Paper is not just imminent, but “very, very imminent”.

I urge the Minister to keep his word. He knows that the longer we wait to bring outdated and ineffective gambling laws into the digital age, the more people will fall victim to insidious online gambling products. For years, colleagues across the House and I have faced an onslaught of opposition from the gambling industry, for which the status quo is the perfect mix of outdated legislation, weak sanctions and limited scope. The reforms that we propose would fix that broken state of affairs.

Last week, GambleAware, a charity linked to the industry, reported that an estimated 1.4 million people suffer harms related to gambling, and that gambling has returned to pre-pandemic levels. According to the Gambling Commission, there are 55,000 problem gamblers aged 11 to 16. A Public Health England report found that 0.5% of people are problem gamblers, 3.8% are at risk and 7% are negatively affected by others’ gambling. The same report estimated that the cost of gambling-related harm is £1.27 billion annually.

Online gambling in particular must be addressed. The majority of online gambling revenue is derived from those classed either as problem gamblers or as at risk. The House of Lords Select Committee on the Gambling Industry found that 60% of gambling industry profits come from the 5% experiencing gambling harm. The University of Liverpool found that for online gambling that is even higher, with 86% of profits coming from that small cohort.

Rather than enter into a proper dialogue with those who are looking to reform and improve our gambling laws, the industry has come forward with very little in the way of remedies. It has resorted to playground name-calling, labelling those who are seeking improvements and reform as prohibitionists and, in my case, a Methodist. As a Welsh woman, I do not consider that an insult. That response is simply not good enough.

People having a bet on the Grand National, placing their Saturday accumulator, or enjoying a night at bingo or in the casino, are not—I repeat not—the focus of our reforms. We are fighting against people being seriously harmed, families being destroyed and lives being lost through gambling addiction and disorder. We cannot, in good conscience, stand by and see any more gambling-related suicides. Nor can we see people turn to substance abuse or crime as a way out of their addiction.

The playbook that the industry uses is very similar to the one it used during the debate on fixed odds betting terminals. We must not be fooled by that narrative. The

[Carolyn Harris]

industry says that the problem is historical, yet just a few weeks ago 888 was fined to the tune of £9.4 million for multiple failings. The industry says that reforms will harm the economy and result in job losses, which is exactly the same argument it used ahead of the reduction in the stake on fixed odds betting terminals. Despite warnings from the industry that 4,500 of the 9,000 betting shops would close as a result of reducing the stake to £2 a spin, 8,000 betting shops are still open today, and many are still clustered in some of our most deprived communities.

Last year, Peers for Gambling Reform commissioned a report, which was carried out by NERA Economic Consulting and concluded that

“industry profits are likely to exceed”

any financial costs associated with proposed reforms. The report stated that

“diverting expenditure by the public to other sectors which are more labour intensive than the gambling sector could create up to 30,000 new jobs, and employee earnings could increase by up to £400 million.”

Proposed reforms would see a

“net increase of £68-£87 million in tax revenues”,

rather than a net loss to the Exchequer. The industry argues that any reform at all will drive people to the black market, but the Gambling Commission has already said that the industry overestimates the existence of the black market, and it is not an argument to hold back reform.

What improvements are needed in the upcoming White Paper? Most importantly, the case for a centralised and independent affordability assessment is overwhelming. It cannot be right that online operators permit customers to deposit and lose hundreds of thousands of pounds, despite those customers having no regular source of income and often using money that is funded by crime. There has been a lot of debate about the level of a soft affordability cap, by which I mean the point at which an open banking check would kick in. Putting a limit of £100 a month on net deposits is a sensible, proportionate and, more importantly, evidence-based position, especially when we consider that the average level of disposable income in Britain is £450 a month, and that 73% of slot players and 85% of non-slot players lose £50 or less a month. A soft cap at £100 is therefore low enough to enable the vast majority of gamblers to continue without any checks whatever, as the vast majority of gambling activity occurs below this level. A £100 check would kick in only for those who gamble well above the average amount each month. Moreover, it does not preclude gamblers spending more than that. It just means that they would have to have an enhanced affordability check, which—surprise, surprise—many of the industry operators already carry out.

I also want to mention several banks that have been supporting their customers by providing gambling blocks. Monzo and Starling were among the first to do so, and I cannot understand why many banks do not offer the same support. It should be mandatory. There are now loopholes whereby gambling companies can accept non-card payments or the information available to the block is not accurate. I ask that Ministers work with the banking industry to ensure that all banks provide a comprehensive blocking facility.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): I wonder what the answer is. I fully understand what the hon. Lady is proposing, but look at the hard evidence from Norway. Norway has done exactly what the hon. Lady is proposing, but 66% of all gambling stakes in Norway are done on the black market or dark web. How does the hon. Lady propose that that does not happen in this case?

Carolyn Harris: Doing nothing is certainly not the answer. I know little about the Norway study, but just because Norway has not been successful, it does not mean to say that the UK Government would not be successful. We cannot afford to have any more of the issues that we have encountered for the last 17 years. Enough life has been lost, and doing nothing is not an answer.

I would like to pay tribute to Annie Ashton, who bravely started an e-petition when her husband Luke sadly took his own life after being lured back into gambling by relentless operators. I strongly back her calls to end the poisonous inducements that the industry uses to hook people on its addictive products. There is no such thing as a free bet.

It is not just inducements that are a massive problem. Gambling advertising has proliferated in recent years. We are now bombarded with gambling adverts on TV, online, at football matches and on billboards. I know that colleagues are particularly concerned about the impact that that has on children. If we look at recent published data, we can see the scale of the problem: 96% of people aged 11 to 24 have seen gambling marketing messages in the last month and are more likely to bet as a result; 45% of 11 to 17-year-olds and 72% of 18 to 24-year-olds see gambling advertising at least once a week on their social media, with one-third of young people reporting seeing it daily; 41,000 under 16 year-olds—children—are estimated to be followers of gambling-related accounts on social media; and 1,200 hours of gambling ads have been played on the radio during the school run hours over the last year.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Does the hon. Lady welcome the whistle-to-whistle ban on advertisements for gambling, which has seen a 97% reduction in the amount of adverts that children see? Would she support what Bet365, a company in Stoke-on-Trent, is supporting, which is that only branding should be advertised, mainly on the pitch side, not any actual odds or free bets that, I agree with her, can be too inducing and, therefore dangerous?

Carolyn Harris: The whistle-to-whistle ban is not worth the paper it was written on. As for supporting anything Bet365 has done, I am sorry, I could not possibly do that. My experience of it does not allow me to do that.

That is a fraction of the alarming statistics that come across my desk each day. We know from research by Ipsos MORI and the University of Stirling that regular exposure to gambling promotions can change perceptions and associations with gambling over time and impact the likelihood that young people will gamble in the future. That advertising is a catalyst to risk and problem gambling in secondary school-aged children as a result, according to the *Journal of Gambling Studies*.

How can we let gambling companies spend more than £1.5 billion a year on advertising to the extent that in one single televised football match over 700 gambling logos were visible throughout the game? That is insane.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Does the hon. Lady think that kind of answers the last intervention? If the gambling companies that are businesses did not think the advertising was successful in capturing more people, would they put £1.5 billion into it, or would they stop advertising now?

Carolyn Harris: The right hon. Gentleman will know my answer. I was surprised when I saw the comment from the industry that advertising did not affect people's behaviour. I thought if that was the case spending £1 would be ridiculous, but to spend £1.5 billion beggars belief.

Jonathan Gullis: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carolyn Harris: I am going to make progress. Economic research has already proven that a ban on gambling advertising in sport would be unlikely to significantly harm sports leagues and teams. The non-gambling sponsors exist and are ready to fill any gap created. With our proposed carve-outs for sectors such as horse racing, we can ensure protection on all sides.

Next is the need for a statutory levy. Chronic underinvestment in the gambling treatment system has led to a scenario in which treatment is unregulated, unaccountable and fails to use the evidence base in the treatment strategies. Between 2% and 3% of people with gambling problems enter the treatment system and nearly all of them enter it through self-referral. A 1% smart levy on industry revenue would provide £130 million, which would be an increase of over £100 million on what we currently receive. That would significantly reduce the UK's disparity with other nations that spend far more per gambler on treatment than the UK does, increasing funds for improved and—most importantly—industry-free education. That would put the UK at the forefront of research on an issue that affects millions of people across the world, would improve our understanding of how gambling is developing in this country and would inform future regulation.

There should be stake limits for online gambling, to give parity with land-based venues, including a maximum £2 stake on harmful slot content. Given the rapidly changing nature of both land-based gambling and online gambling, it is essential that limits on stakes and prizes, and potentially other factors, are renewed on a triannual basis.

A gambling ombudsman must be set up to ensure fair representation for those who experience problems with operators. Although the Gambling Commission receives complaints as the basis for possible enforcement action, it does not act on behalf of customers in pursuit of redress. That has allowed operators to withhold winnings unfairly and to use obscure terms and conditions to require customers to wager their deposit dozens of times before they are allowed to withdraw their money.

I know that the Gambling Commission has already introduced very welcome identity and age verification requirements, banned the use of credit cards, acted in relation to speed of play and length of time spent on a game, taken measures to require customers to have

information on their winnings and their losses, and required all operators to sign up to GAMSTOP. However, there is far, far more to be done.

It is not just my colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group on gambling-related harm or the Peers for Gambling Reform group who support these measures. Recent polling commissioned by YouGov confirms that the British public are also on our side. Of those surveyed, 78% believe that gambling advertising should be completely banned on all platforms before the watershed and 67% also think that sports clubs should no longer have gambling sponsors on their kits or around their stadiums. In addition, 79% of those surveyed believe that under-18s should not be exposed to gambling advertisements in any form and 72% agree with me that affordability checks should be in place to help to prevent people from losing more money than they can afford to lose. Also, 69% of those surveyed think that online slots should have a maximum stake of £2. Finally, 76% of those surveyed think that the gambling industry should not get to choose where funding for treatment for gambling addiction and research goes. For me, that is a bit of a no-brainer, because doing otherwise is letting the gambling industry mark its own homework; the gambling industry gives the money, so it gets to say where it is spent. It is the people who are damaged the most who lose out; this industry only cares about its profits.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Member is making the most impassioned contribution. I hope that I will not interrupt the stream of useful statistics that support her argument, but I will just give an example of—I had better be careful in my description—a senior medical person in the highlands who was well-off and well-paid. They committed suicide and it was discovered afterwards that they were a gambling addict.

The point I am making, and I am sure the hon. Member will agree, is that it is a mistake to think that gambling is something that just affects one particular sector of society; it is a problem that can hit anyone. And the local community in the highlands has never quite got over that person's death.

I will conclude my remarks by saying that it is worth remembering that gambling is all over the place; it is found at every level of society.

Carolyn Harris: I will not name names either. I will just say that there are people in this room at this very moment who have made the greatest sacrifice of all, having given their children to an addiction, with little done to support them.

It is clear that the British public, the evidence, and the momentum are all on the side of reform. All we are asking for is effective protections to be put in place for customers, and for an industry that is all too often shamelessly exploitative to be reined in and regulated effectively. If we tackle the question of affordability, ensure restrictions on advertising and introduce stake limits to help prevent harm, we can tackle gambling disorder and addiction at its very core. If we push to introduce a statutory levy on the industry to properly fund research, education and treatment, along with a gambling ombudsman, we can at least try to help those who are already stuck in the depths of exploitation.

[Carolyn Harris]

This is a once-in-a-generation chance to update our laws and, most importantly, save lives. It is now in the hands of a few people who I pray to God are listening to this debate, because the time for talking is done; now is the time for action. The gambling industry has run amok for 17 years. It cannot be allowed to be so destructive any longer.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Christina Rees (in the Chair): I intend to start the wind-ups at 3.27 pm, so if Back Benchers take a maximum of four minutes, we should get everyone in.

2.51 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I will be reasonably brief, as the hon. Lady—in this case, my hon. Friend—the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) has laid out all the criteria. I want to emphasise a couple of points, and then appeal to my colleagues to think carefully about what their arguments really are.

It is worth reminding ourselves that this is a very cross-party affair. Across the political parties, we all campaigned for reform back in 2019. Recent polling shows that 70% of existing Conservative MPs agree that people should be protected from losing more than they can afford, so straightaway my own party is very strongly in favour of the changes that the Minister, who will be answering in due course, is looking to make; and I encourage him in doing so. Some 64% of Conservative MPs agreed that the industry needs greater regulation, and 68%—I know these figures have been given already—agreed with stake limits for online gambling. That is my political party, but this is very much a cross-party issue, and I know that Members who represent other parties will make similar points. This is not party political; it is about harm, and how we control that harm.

We have been told frequently by the gambling companies—I remember the debates on fixed odds betting terminals and so on—how they would all do self-regulation very carefully and responsibly. The industry simply did not take the big and early decisions that it should have taken; in a way, it has brought this on itself. I happen to think that many of these companies are very greedy. They have resisted regulation because they have been making such handsome profits out of the way that the industry works right now—excessive profits, in a way—which should be the giveaway. Failing to have self-regulated early means that it is simply not feasible to trust those companies to do what they should do.

As I understand it, the public agree that these changes need to happen and, as I say, parliamentarians are also in favour. If any colleagues have not done so, they should meet those who have suffered enormously as a result of gambling-related harm. Proportionately, a very high number of the British public—7%—are involved in serious gambling harms. That is to say that their families, family members, children, husbands, wives and partners also get sucked into their situation, because an individual or individuals have got themselves sucked into terrible debts, spending more than they can afford and becoming more in debt than their family can afford.

I want to draw attention to one element of the issue about which I have been particularly furious, which is the existence of VIP rooms. The gambling companies persisted with those rooms until they finally started explaining that they were somehow not going to do so any more, but this has been going on for years. VIP rooms target the most vulnerable people—the people who, as the hon. Member for Swansea East said, the gambling companies make their money off—who are seriously caught up in gambling, often spending much more than they can afford. They are encouraged and incentivised to gamble more, getting special tickets to events, meeting celebrities, and being told what wonderful and clever people they are. All of this is a vortex of debt to them.

We know something about debt that is really important, and the Centre for Social Justice did a lot of work on this: debt is the single biggest cause of family breakdown. It is a dramatic and damaging process that destroys lives. It has led, as we know, to embarrassment, shame and eventual suicide—although in some cases people are caught before they get there. The truth is that debt is damaging, and for many people gambling is a real cause of serious and unregulated debt.

I do not believe in constantly regulating everything, but at times industries need to be regulated to shape the market. The gambling industry was deregulated far too much. At the time, I made a speech saying that I thought it would lead to serious problems, and that speech was right. It is not about the fact that the Labour party did it at the time; the reality was that it was wrong, whoever did it. Now we have to try to make that better. To improve the situation is not about being against gambling. It is about the gambling harms that come from an unregulated and unsupported process, and it is about not allowing people who do gamble to fall into the deep trough of debt.

My final point is about black markets. I have lost count of the number of times that I have been told, when any reform or change is planned, that there is going to somehow be a black market, and that people are going to go off and use it. A gambling black market is a pretty specialised area. If we are worried about that black market, we should simply seek to reform it; we do not stop doing something because we think it will somehow plunge people into debt. I appeal to colleagues, and those who may not be here today, to accept that the time is long overdue.

The hon. Member for Swansea East is quite right that we must move now and swiftly. I urge the Government to come forward and not to listen to the shrill voices that surround them at times, telling them, “This is going to destroy and damage an industry, and it is going to lead to huge hardships and problems.” Given the level of profits and the private money that is taken out of the industry, frankly, if it had common sense it would plough that money back in and then not need to suffer anything at all.

The time is overdue; the Government are now in the right place, although the Minister will no doubt explain that further. The Minister responsible for this issue—the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp)—has already explained his intentions. It is time for the gambling industry to recognise that the time is up, change is coming—it has to come—and it is

not too soon, given the lives that have been lost and the damage that has been done to families. I say to my colleagues, do not continue to defend bad practice.

2.57 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing this important debate, and for the typically passionate way in which she set out the case for the Government to act faster on combating gambling-related harm. I declare my interest as a member of the APPG on gambling related harm.

As we know, the Government's review was completed a year ago this week, and it received 16,000 submissions. Gambling-related harm is an issue that I care passionately about. Why? It is not because of the statistics and the facts, although they are compelling and I congratulate colleagues on reminding us of them. The reason that I care is closer to home: I see the impact of gambling-related harm in my constituency on a regular basis, as do so many of us through our work with constituents. Faced with those stories, I cannot fail to see the case for reform. I share the view that problem gambling in the UK should be treated as a public health issue. Gambling harm is happening every day. It destroys lives, damages health and mental health and, at worst, can lead to the loss of loved ones. There is also the cost to society in lost tax receipts, benefit claims, welfare, and the cost to the NHS and the criminal justice system. Above all, the impact on the health of those affected and the families around them should concern us most, and should be the focus of the Government as they prepare to release the White Paper.

The publication of the gambling White Paper cannot come soon enough. I urge the Minister and his colleagues in government to take the opportunity to deliver meaningful change where the industry has not. Others across Parliament, in the media and beyond will say that the industry has already introduced significant reforms. Although change is welcome, the stories that so many of us continue to hear demonstrate it is not enough. The time for action is now, and our message is that we do not need to wait; so much can be done before we reach for primary legislation. I hope that the Government will grasp the urgency of the situation and announce changes that can be delivered as soon as possible.

The case for reform is not only mounting; it is overwhelming. However, I and my colleagues across Parliament who have campaigned tirelessly to stop gambling harm face a common challenge. With alarming regularity, we are now told that reform will stop the average punter spending a few quid or that it will prevent people from enjoying themselves. That narrative has to stop. Reform is not about prohibition. It would not stop people doing something they have enjoyed without harm for many years. Reform is about preventing harm and stopping an out-of-control industry from taking advantage of people who are suffering. I have heard several times that gamblers will be driven to the unregulated black market. My response is simple: I do not believe it. The Gambling Commission has previously said that the risk is overstated.

Beyond that, we have to ask ourselves, if harm is already taking place on a vast scale through licensed operators today, why would we not want to regulate so they act more responsibly? There is no reason for us to

be caught in a regulatory race to the bottom. As the publication of the White Paper comes ever closer, I hope that the Government have listened and acted on the many concerns raised in order to prevent gambling harm across the country.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East highlighted, it is estimated that in excess of 55,000 children in this country between the ages of 11 and 16 are gambling addicts. The gambling industry spends more than £1.5 billion a year on advertising, and 60% of its profits come from the 5% who are already problem gamblers or at risk of becoming so. On average, a problem gambler commits suicide every day. A recent report from Public Health England showed that the annual economic burden of gambling harm is estimated to be more than £1.2 billion, with the greatest risks occurring in the more deprived areas of the country. That is not levelling up, but levelling down.

There are many actions we need to take, but I add my name to the calls for four key reforms, several of which can happen now as we begin to deal with this terrible problem in our communities and societies. First, to underline what others have already said, we need an online system that ensures that people cannot spend more than they can afford. Secondly, I cannot understand why online gambling is not subject to the same stake limits as fixed odds betting terminals and in-person gambling. That has to be changed. During lockdown, people were at home more and restricted in their movements, with access to mini casinos on their laptops or mobile phones. That easy access to online gambling is dangerous and puts vulnerable people at much greater risk. Thirdly, there should be a smart statutory levy on the gambling industry to pay for education, treatment and research. Finally, we should remove gambling advertising from sports and sports team, especially sports to which children are exposed.

The Gambling Act 2005 is outdated and has often been described as analogue legislation for a digital age. It was in place before the advent of mobile smartphones that provide access to the mini casino in our pockets and before the internet provided an even larger platform for gambling advertising. The asks that I and many others have outlined are a foundation to build on in creating a society where the risk from real harm and gambling is not acceptable. The evidence is there, the harm that is being caused is well documented, and the time for action is well overdue.

3.3 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and it is also only right to draw everyone's attention to the fact that before I came to this place, I was employed by Bet365 between 2006 and 2019. I have not come to this place to be a spokesperson for the gambling industry, but I hope that my experience can be used to inform the House in such debates. Bet365 is a major employer in Newcastle-under-Lyme—I see two colleagues from Stoke-on-Trent here as well—and contributes a huge amount to the local area and to skilled jobs there. I will come to that later.

First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing this important debate. I pay tribute to her tenacity and that of my right hon.

[Aaron Bell]

Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), and to everybody who has pushed the subject of gambling-related harm, which we all want to see reduced. I see the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), in his place. The Gambling Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), visited Bet365 last week, and I know that he shares that ambition. I want to share my experience and understanding of how the industry works to respond to some of the suggestions made by the hon. Member for Swansea East in her opening remarks, and to say that I do fear the impact on the black market. I will come to that in a minute.

The hon. Lady is right to have held the industry to account for so long. It has been too slow to adapt in the past, but has made some big changes in recent years, such as the whistle-to-whistle ban and the code on high-value customers, as referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green. High-value customers are not just addicts; some are seriously wealthy, so have been treated as VIPs in the past. They are big customers that any capitalist firm would wish to have. However, I accept that VIPs have gone wrong in the past.

Points have already been made about advertising, but I am pleased that 20% of TV advertising by the industry now promotes safer gambling and that we are tackling problem gambling. Figures published by the regulator, the Gambling Commission, covering the period to December 2021, showed that the problem gambling rate was down from 0.6% to 0.3%, and that the number of those at moderate risk has fallen from 1.2% to 0.8%. In countries such as Italy, Norway and France, those rates are much higher and there are more black markets, either because online gambling is illegal, there is a state monopoly or there are such high tax rates for the companies registered there. I accept that the black market is not a big problem in the UK at the moment, but that is because we have a well-regulated structure for gambling. We can regulate it better and I hope we do so through the review, but we must be mindful that that risk is out there.

I will now talk a little about Bet365 and what it is doing. The Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South, my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) and I visited Bet365 last week. The company has been at the forefront of the industry in trying to address the issue, and has gone above and beyond current regulatory guidance. As I have said, it is rooted in north Staffordshire and did not offshore its sports betting to Gibraltar when most other firms did in order to avoid tax. It has always paid its fair share of taxes, and Denise Coates has always paid her fair share of income tax and not sought to avoid that, despite the headlines that come with that every year.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): This is a caveat, but Denise Coates paid herself a billion pounds over the course of four years. If I earned a billion pounds, I would make sure I paid my tax as well.

Aaron Bell: I am glad to hear that. The fact that she has paid her tax and has not sought to keep that money in the company or do anything else with it is admirable.

Bet365 pays a huge amount of tax and is a British company with huge export success. A lot of its revenue comes from abroad, and any bet taken from abroad improves our balance of payments as an export success. Denise Coates has donated a nine-figure sum to the Denise Coates Foundation, which funds charities locally, nationally and internationally. Bet365 also owns Stoke City football club, so it is rooted in that community.

The hon. Member for Swansea East rightly raised a number of issues, but Bet365 has already gone above and beyond regulatory and industry guidance, by setting deposit limits, picking up on red flags, and having a huge team for responsible gambling proactively contacting people believed to be at risk. The hon. Lady said she wanted a net deposit limit of £100 a month, but I hope she will understand my genuine concern that the process of asking people for data, such as mortgage and bank statements or pay slips, is very intrusive.

In the experience of Bet365 and other firms that I have spoken to, people do not want to provide that information and at the point at which they are asked for it, they stop betting with that firm. We do not know where they then go. Do they go to another firm, elsewhere or stop gambling altogether? We do not have enough information, but lessons from the industry tell us that asking people for pay slips and mortgage and bank statements stops them engaging with the firm that already knows their behaviour best. I am not against deposit limits, and neither is Bet365, but we have to get the level right and have lower levels for young people, and so on. Equally, Bet365 has set slot stake limits lower than previously and is prepared to look at feedback.

Change is necessary. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Swansea East for her campaign. I hope that in the course of the review the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport can learn from firms that are at the forefront of the sector, such as Bet365, which is a major local employer that is setting standards for responsible gambling within the sector that I believe we can learn from.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Can Members reduce the length of their comments to three and a half to four minutes? I call Jim Shannon.

3.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on her passion and her commitment. I fully support her. I like to think that I am equally passionate when it comes to this issue and I am very keen to see the changes that we all desire. On the whole, I believe people should be entitled to live and let live and make their own mistakes, but only in so far as that mistake does not harm others. Unfortunately, gambling does affect others and, as the hon. Lady said, it affects entire households, including people I know and will speak about, without mentioning any names.

In Northern Ireland, an online survey identified 2.3% of the population as having a gambling problem. Although that percentage is likely to underestimate the number of problem gamblers, it is still more than four times higher

than that recorded in mainland Britain and almost three times higher than in the Republic of Ireland. Again, that illustrates my concerns. I can think of one lady in particular in my constituency, whose husband would often come home on a Friday night with no money to pay the bills. It put her and her children in a desperately difficult position. It almost drove the couple apart and ruined their marriage, lives, health and wellbeing. That is just one example.

Some 4% of suicides among 20 to 24-year-olds are gambling-related. There are 250 gambling-related suicides per year in the UK. A Swedish study found that the suicide rate for those with a gambling disorder was 15 times that of the general population. I give those figures because that is what we are looking at: lives that could be saved by a change in legislation. I understand that the gambling sector has done a lot, but it has not done enough. I ask the sector and the Minister to engage with gambling organisations and those who are trying to make lives better and save lives. It is clear that the damage to the community at large is not met with an equal amount of regulation. With that in mind, I ask the Minister to take every step to make the changes.

Gambling with Lives is a charity that was set up in Fermanagh in Northern Ireland by grieving parents who lost their son by suicide after a gambling addiction. They are putting their time, money and effort into raising awareness to ensure that no other parent will know the pain they feel from their loss. They began an initiative in schools because they know that is where it begins for many gamblers, and never more so than now when the world is at our fingertips through our smartphones. I take my hat off to their drive and determination to bring good from loss. Can we say in this House and in this debate today that we are approaching the matter with equal drive? With respect, are the Minister and the Government also involved in pushing hard on the issue?

I would like to see the introduction of regulations that would require operators to pay an annual levy to the Gambling Commission, to create a joint advisory levy board with oversight over the levy paid to the Gambling Commission, to reallocate the £60 million pledge to GambleAware for 2023 to the Gambling Commission under the oversight of the levy board, and to implement the targeted findings into the smart levy. That is why this debate is important. It is about changing lives and saving lives. Lives and families depend on this, and I believe the Government's approach is not dependable. With that in mind, it must change, and I look to the Minister to assure me that it will change and for the better.

3.12 pm

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Everybody here understands the damage caused by addiction, not just to the individual but to families, marriages and communities. Nobody doubts for a minute the challenges that the Government face in trying to regulate, in this case, the gambling industry to protect the most vulnerable, while at the same allowing the vast majority to enjoy their hobby or, in some cases, profession without it becoming an overburdened, bureaucratic straitjacket or without imposing a nanny-state solution on the majority. I say that because if the industry is restricted too harshly, the evidence shows that it just forces people on to the black market or the dark web, where there are

absolutely no checks or balances in place to protect people. No, it is not difficult to access for someone who wants or needs to use it.

The reality is that problem gambling rates in the UK, at 0.3%, are low compared with our neighbours: in Italy, it is 2.4%; in Norway, 1.4%; and in France, 1.3%. Despite what the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) says, a big part of that success is down to what industry in the UK has embraced, with programmes like "BeGambleAware". That is not just a saying or catchphrase, but something tangible in every regulated high street betting shop with human interaction, as well as their online presence. The large industry players in this country have pledged contributions of over £100 million for research, education and treatment in this area.

Carolyn Harris: Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that for the money the industry has given, it says where it is spent? It has influence over how that money is spent and therefore it precludes people from accessing services because they feel there is industry interference.

Craig Whittaker: I was trying to highlight the fact that the hon. Lady said earlier that the industry was doing nothing, and the reality is that it is not doing nothing. It is actually part of why we have a much lower gambling problem in this country than our neighbours do. The industry is also spending a further £10 million on safer gambling education for all 11 to 19-year-olds throughout the country. As we have seen during the pandemic when we were all working from home, advertising on safer gambling is a much larger proportion of the money spent on gambling adverts.

That does not mean that we do nothing more. Of course there is more to do, and anyone who has experienced living with a problem gambler knows how potentially life-damaging it is for everyone around them. It is therefore right that any review of gambling has the most vulnerable at its heart.

Let us briefly look at what happens when we abandon a balanced, competitive, regulated market, which is the only way to deter the hugely increasing black market. I mentioned Norway earlier, which introduced restrictions on stakes, strict affordability checks, and curbs on advertising. Instead of protecting the most vulnerable, it drove them to the black market, where 66% of all gambling in Norway now takes place. There is no human interaction on that market, no checks on affordability, and no lifelines available, either. So Norway's 1.4% problem gambling figure is much higher because it does not know where the problem gamblers are.

Aaron Bell: On the black market, my hon. Friend rightly draws attention to the lack of protection for problem gamblers, but there is also no protection for people to ensure they get paid if they have a winning bet. They do not have any of the security that we have here in the United Kingdom that ensures people will be treated fairly by the operator, nor all the problem gambling measures that we have.

Craig Whittaker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We get legal protection in the regulated market that we have here in the UK.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I draw the Chamber's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. There is a further point that has not been mentioned. I represent the Cheltenham racecourse, and 45% of horseracing's income comes from bookmakers. It is extremely important that we tackle problem gambling. One problem gambler is one too many, but is not that statistic very important when the Government consider how to take a balanced approach? The entire sport of horseracing is very worried indeed about the potential loss of income in what is not a well-funded sport.

Craig Whittaker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we see that in snooker and darts as well, which rely on funding to ensure they remain popular.

I mentioned Norway and I will highlight a similar story in France, where online gambling is illegal and 57% of all gambling is done on the black market. In Bulgaria, it is 47%. In Italy, 23% of all money staked now goes to the black market. Here in the UK, although the figures are low in comparison, we have seen a large rise in online unregulated gambling, from 2.2% to 4.5% over the last 18 months. In unregulated, black market gambling—

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman wind up, please?

Craig Whittaker: Of course. The average stakes are much higher, with billions and billions of pounds involved.

Let us be careful what we ask for. Although the scourge of addiction is a problem that we need to address, we have to be very careful that an act of good intention does not make the problem far worse than it currently is. The evidence is there if the Government are keen to look. We must not throw the baby out with the bathwater. The Government need to work closely with the industry on solutions and not destroy good intentions by imposing on the industry rather than working with it.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): I am sorry for the three speakers remaining. We have less than nine minutes left, so that is three minutes each.

3.19 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am indebted to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who secured today's debate. My biggest challenge is perhaps for the Minister, because we do not have a public health Minister sitting in his place and we are talking about a public health issue. I am pleased that in York, after much persuasion, we have now got somebody from our public health team appointed to look at the problem, but they are starting with a blank sheet of paper because we do not have the local data that they need to drive the health initiative.

As a country, we were shocked to hear that 55,000 children had a gambling addiction. Some 14% of young people aged 11 to 16 had spent their own pocket money to gamble in the week before the report was carried out, spending an average of £16 a week. The report also found that, over the year, 39% of children had gambled, with 6% using their parents' online account to do so.

The next generation of gamblers are being drawn in by not only the gambling industry, but the gaming industry. That industry has not been mentioned today, but with 31% of gamers opening loot boxes, it is causing equal harm. One young constituent was thousands of pounds in debt from gaming—what a way to start their life. Young people are really at risk.

The behaviour of the gambling industry is to groom young people and put them in a place of harm. We see the lobbying that takes place in this place—the gambling industry just does not hold back. We see the intrusive behaviours online and the grooming techniques. We have heard so much today about the advertising, the free bets and those luxury days out that are offered to lure people into that space and draw them into debt. The industry has the data—it knows what it is doing. It is therefore a deliberate act. We have to approach that with an equal and opposite bold approach and not be fearful of the industry.

I am really grateful for the work that people are doing across the health sector to take this issue seriously. Matt Gaskell, who runs the northern hub of the NHS gambling service, is exceptional at the work that he does.

We have to break the links through which the gambling industry thinks it can control what health interventions are made. Yes, we should tax the industry up to the hilt, but we should use that general taxation to fund proper investment in the public health measures that are now being put in place.

The treatment provided by the service is 92% effective. However, only 8,500 people have accessed it, while only 6% have accessed the helpline provided. We know that it is not effective intervention. It expects very vulnerable people to be able to access those services.

We need to open up the conversation and the dialogue. It is really important that we start talking about this issue and open it up, so that people feel they have a safe space in which to talk about their debt problems, as opposed to feeling at risk.

3.22 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Ms Rees. Like all Members present, I recognise the real importance of addressing problem gambling. However, I think it important that we put this issue in context, especially given that the latest Gambling Commission figures show a drop in problem gambling from 0.6% to 0.3% in the 18 months up to December 2021. Those figures compare with far higher rates of problem gambling among many of our European neighbours.

The vast majority of people in the UK gamble responsibly and safely. EY has suggested that the sector supports 119,000 jobs and contributes £4.5 billion in tax and £7.7 billion in gross value added to the economy. In Stoke-on-Trent alone, the industry supports 4,500 jobs, predominantly at Bet365, many of which are highly skilled. We have very few of those high-skilled jobs in areas such as Stoke-on-Trent, which is still on the journey towards the levelling up of opportunities.

It is also important to recognise the significant investment by the sector in sport and wider charitable causes, such as through the Denise Coates Foundation, which most recently gave more than £1 million to humanitarian efforts in Ukraine. More than £40 million is provided

annually to the English Football League alone—which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) mentioned, includes Stoke City Football Club, which is based in my constituency at the Bet365 Stadium. Most of the investment in the club and the Stoke City community foundation comes from Bet365. The community foundation, in particular, does fantastic work to engage young and vulnerable people in sports. Without the investment of the gambling sector in such causes, much of that work simply would not be possible.

Most recently, we have seen many in the sector lead the way by improving standards, including investing in improvements in safer gambling education and in efforts to address problem gambling. The action that industry has taken, including to introduce a whistle-to-whistle ban on sport advertising and almost entirely removing gambling ads seen by children, has resulted in a significant reduction in problem gambling. Those standards should be implemented across the sector. I have met Bet365 and I know it has led the way on much of the work, including significant measures for those who need that support and flagging concerns where they exist.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Order. Wind up, please.

Jack Brereton: It is important that these actions are further rolled out throughout the sector, but there is a significant risk that if we do not get this right, we will just encourage a growing black market industry. The number of people accessing unlicensed betting websites doubled between 2019 and 2020. I urge the Government to be very cautious and to fully understand the implications, to ensure that we do not see unintended consequences that would only further gift those criminal black market operators. We want proper action focused on those who really need help and support.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Order. Thank you. Jonathan Gullis, you have two minutes. Go for it.

3.25 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I congratulate the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing this debate. Ultimately, what she said is important. No one here is in denial of the fact that reform needs to happen or that we need to go further.

In Stoke-on-Trent we have Bet365, which is acting impressively to make sure that we see improvements in what they are doing, such as the age verification policy, a deposit limit, advice and the ability to set. If someone wants to change their deposit limit, it takes 24 hours and a cooling-off period before they can do so. Behaviour algorithms monitor that behaviour, which means that someone could be picked up by the early risk detection system, which leads to safer gambling messages. There are on-site messages signposting tools, sharing with the customer information on their behaviour, mandatory problem gambling self-assessment, phone calls with customers, affordability assessments being trialled at the moment, and tailored net deposit limits. Those things are in place. The gambling industry is working hard to improve and to find solutions. Although reform is needed, it must be done sensibly.

3.27 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I must say, I am pleased that people have come here to talk on behalf of the gambling industry. Too often, we talk in a silo and do not hear what other people have to say. I am glad they have come here, spoken out, expressed themselves so eloquently and read their Bet365 briefing so beautifully.

Jonathan Gullis: That's not true.

Ronnie Cowan: It absolutely is true. I was sat here beside you and watched you read it.

Jonathan Gullis: The hon. Gentleman refers to a briefing that I was reading. I was, indeed, reading a briefing that was presented to the Minister when he visited to explain what the industry was doing, which is forming part of the gambling review. I do not see why it is bad to get a briefing from companies sharing what they are doing. What the hon. Gentleman said is ludicrous.

Ronnie Cowan: As I said, a briefing from Bet365—that is exactly what it was.

Jonathan Gullis: For the Minister.

Ronnie Cowan: It does not matter who it was written for; it is a briefing from Bet365.

Jonathan Gullis: You have never had a briefing from anyone else.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Order.

Ronnie Cowan: We will cover that in a minute; we are wasting time.

It is simply not true that 66% of Norwegian gambling is on the black market. I am not trying to replicate Norway. In Norway, gambling is state monopolised, and because of that they use the internet a lot to gamble. In fact, the 66% relates to people using online gambling. It is not black market gambling as we understand it.

On whether the whistle-to-whistle ban works, Stirling University carried out a survey during five football matches with a whistle-to-whistle ban and recorded 2,000 gambling marketing references. It is clearly not working or protecting the people it is supposed to protect.

The all-party parliamentary group on gambling related harm has spoken to all the chief executives of the big gambling firms. We have listened to what they have to say. We have spoken to gamblers who gamble every day and do not have a problem with gambling—we are not trying to step on their toes. If they want to gamble and they are comfortable, they can gamble. We are not prohibitionists. We have spoken to people who control the provision and support for people with addiction. We have spoken to academics, to addicts and to people whose lives have been destroyed by the gambling industry. That is the rounded, responsible way to go about forming a view on this topic, not to sit here and read a briefing from a gambling firm. A number of figures have been chucked around, and they came straight from the *PoliticsHome* article by Michael Dugher, chief executive officer of the Betting and Gaming Council.

[Ronnie Cowan]

I am not accusing anybody in this room—absolutely no one—but I do know that among those who support the gambling industry, a number of elected MPs are well funded by the industry to do so, while among the people who are fighting to reform gambling and make it a safer environment for all our constituents, no money changes hands.

The film “Erin Brokovich” tells the true story of a campaign against the practices of the Pacific Gas and Electric Company, which had illegally dumped hexavalent chromium—deadly toxic waste—and poisoned the residents in the area. For most people, it is inconceivable that directors sitting in the boardroom of a large and successful company would allow such damage or behaviour in the full knowledge of the harm that they are doing, but that case is not unique. Large corporations have a history of putting profit over people, be they the tobacco giants, which have a long history of denying the health risks of smoking, or the logging companies that ruthlessly exploit the Amazon rainforest for personal gain.

In that respect, industry and politics share the same dynamics. The power to make decisions that affect the lives of many are often made by a few people who sit at the heart of the process. Just like Prime Ministers and senior members of the Cabinet, chief executives and company directors make choices that can have huge impacts on people’s lives, for good and for bad. When they act in their own self-interests, they can heap misery on many others. The damage that they cause may not be apparent to them—they can confine themselves to their ivory towers—but plenty of people who witness that harm are prepared to testify if listened to. Throughout history, a catalogue of people have been willing to turn a blind eye to injustices in return for the opportunity to feather their own nests. When chief executive officers are driven solely by the pursuit of massive personal wealth and the privilege that it brings, the plight of others can easily be ignored or underestimated.

The gambling firms must be today’s equivalent of the tobacco firms. They have taken vast amounts of money, generated massive profits and paid their elite employees huge salaries, while ruthlessly pursuing punters and squeezing every penny out of them. The health and welfare of their customers is not a priority. Games are designed to be addictive. The exponential growth of online casinos has removed the human touch, and punters are reduced to being part of the machine.

Gambling online can be done 24/7—cooling-off periods no longer exist, and chasing losses goes unchallenged. People who have self-excluded are often approached and tempted back to gambling. Free bets in VIP rooms are lures to hook often vulnerable people and draw them back into the fold. People have turned to crime to feed their addictions, families have been left broken, and people have committed suicide. In attempts to divert criticism, the public relations departments of the gambling industry are quick to point out the charitable organisations that they support. In fact, if those who run the gambling industry paid themselves less and their employees more, that money would be spent in local communities, where the benefit would be felt—less charity, more fair distribution of wealth.

The gambling industry also funds research into addiction and support for sufferers, and picks up the tab for the Gambling Commission, which regulates the industry, but it is not right that those who cause the harm have financial control of the research, education, treatment and regulation. The link between industry money and those services must be broken, and funding must be channelled through the NHS in the form of a smart statutory levy. The UK gambling industry employs more than 45,000 people and directly contributes more than £4 billion to the Exchequer. Those are impressive numbers, but the money spent on gambling does not yield as much tax revenue as money spent in the retail or food sectors, and we cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that some of those jobs and much of that profit are the result of gambling-related harm.

I am not a prohibitionist, but I recognise that the gambling industry has to change; it must take responsibility for its products and its punters, and it must recognise the damage of addiction and play a part in reducing it. The industry has run amok since 2005, but in this digital age it is now time to grow up and act responsibly.

3.34 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is really good to see you in the Chair, Ms Rees. May I start by paying tribute to my hon Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for securing this debate and, more importantly, for her work over the years. She has been a brilliant campaigner on this issue and set out the problems very clearly in her speech, as did my hon. Friends the Members for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who gave powerful speeches. I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate, particularly the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). It is not often that I agree with every word he says, but I did today.

We have had a variety of contributions, but there is something that shines through—namely, the wide recognition and consensus that reform is needed. As we know, the Gambling Act 2005, which is the basis for regulation of gambling in the UK, has not been updated since it was passed. Today’s debate is a reminder of how unfit that legislation is in meeting the demands of the digital age. As we have heard today, the mental and physical health consequences of harmful gambling can be devastating in many ways. Many of us have met people who have been damaged, and whose families have been damaged, by gambling.

Aside from the cost to individuals, the Government’s own gambling-related harms evidence review showed that the cost to the Government is, at a minimum, at least £340 million each year. Despite that, it has now been two years since the Government committed to publishing a gambling White Paper. Meanwhile, someone with gambling-related problems dies by suicide every day. Government action is long overdue.

The experiences, the stories and the numbers speak for themselves, particularly when it comes to the rapid increase in online gambling practices. I want to particularly focus on that area, as many others have, given that it is the source of many of the harms that we have heard about today,

Among women in particular, online gambling is growing at an alarming rate. According to research by GambleAware, it almost tripled during the pandemic. We need only look at the data for 2020-21 from GamCare's national gambling helpline—it shows that 84% of calls made by individuals related to concerns about online gambling habits—to get a feel for the scale of the problem. It is a problem that we did not appreciate in 2005, but we must now address it and treat it as a public health issue. We need to do more to protect individuals against addictive and easily accessible games, and those protections must include safeguards and affordability checks, particularly for online slot and casino games, where the Government have been slow to act.

As I have said, change is long overdue. Only last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) led an Adjournment debate on the tragic death of his constituent Jack Ritchie, who was driven to take his own life after battling a severe gambling addiction. Jack saw his addiction begin at his local bookies at the age of 17 before moving onto online gambling. That kind of addiction can come very quickly and have devastating consequences.

Jack's story is a familiar one. I met a group of former gambling addicts about a month ago and they were from a wide variety of backgrounds; as my hon. Friend the Member for York Central pointed out, gambling addiction can hit anybody. They had all followed that same pattern: starting to gamble and then getting into online gambling, and it destroyed their lives. Unbelievably, at the time, banks were prepared to give them loans to fund their gambling habit. It is a problem that we must get a grip on. The whole aim of gambling adverts, incentives and VIP schemes is to maintain or increase the spend of their so-called valuable clients. Those harmful schemes are addictive in nature and offer supposedly free stakes—as my hon. Friend said, there is no such thing as a free bet—to lure customers in. We need to do everything we can to make sure that people like Jack who are aware of their addiction have the tools and support available to help them through their problem.

Will the Minister give an indication of the Government's thoughts on imposing a mandatory levy on all gambling operators? A levy would help to fund educational resources and treatment services for people suffering as a consequence of their gambling. Colleagues will, I think, be aware that there is already the legal power to impose a levy on the gambling industry; it is already there in legislation. The Government have always insisted that the industry should support harm-reduction work on a voluntary basis, but the current, voluntary system lacks consistency, transparency and accountability. The big five gambling companies have committed to paying 1% of their gross yields towards safer gambling initiatives by 2023, but the variation between online casinos and their donations is a concern. As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, many of us do not trust that all the gambling companies will act to do the right thing. Labour believes that operators can and must do more to support vulnerable people.

I hope that the Minister will also reflect on the huge increase in online gambling advertising, especially during live sporting events. That can lead to a normalisation of gambling among young people. I am keen to understand the Government's thinking on how to tackle that—how

they can create the evidence base to understand how that advertising affects gambling addiction and how that can inform future policy.

As the online space continues to develop—we are now looking at the issue of gambling in the metaverse, with the potential for virtual reality casino experiences and other experiences—we need to be looking ahead. I am keen to know what the Government are thinking in terms of plans to tighten up safeguards, with a view to the future and gambling in the metaverse. Obviously, we have the Online Safety Bill coming up. That is a matter for another day; we need the Minister to be clear and gambling-focused in his response today. There is currently a discrepancy between the regulation of physical gambling and the regulation of online gambling, with lower-harm games such as bingo being subject to tighter restrictions in some areas than addictive online betting. We need to know the specific steps that the Government are taking to ensure that there is parity. We have concerns that without action and a proper licensing process, the online space will continue to develop as a wild west when it comes to gambling products.

Most importantly, given the extent of the issues and the problems that we have heard about, we need to know exactly when the gambling review is due to be published. With respect, we need a date. We have been waiting for a date for a long time now. What we need to see is a plan to tackle problem gambling that is fit for the modern age. There is clearly a political consensus on the importance of getting this right, on the need for reform, so the Minister can be assured of widespread support if the Government act effectively, listen and get the balance right.

Jonathan Gullis: On a point of order, Ms Rees. I am very grateful to you and to the Minister for agreeing to allow me to do this. I do apologise. Because my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) kept the clock ticking down on me, I was unable, and forgot, to draw hon. Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests for the £540-worth of match tickets to Stoke City versus Fulham at the Bet365 stadium in January. I do apologise to Members for that.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): The record is duly corrected. Thank you.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for correcting the record; that is absolutely appropriate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I thank the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for securing this very important debate and all those who have contributed, in generally a very constructive manner.

I know how committed the hon. Member for Swansea East and many other Members—in fact, I think this applies to every single person who spoke today—are to gambling reform. I thank her and other parliamentarians for the many meetings that they have had with Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Ministers in recent months. Their perspectives and evidence on the issues that we are considering through the review of the

[Nigel Huddleston]

Gambling Act 2005 are very valuable indeed. She and all other hon. Members who spoke today are quite right to make the case that reform is needed. It has been 17 years since the Gambling Act was passed, and it is clear that the risks of harm and the opportunities to prevent it are very different now from when legislation was introduced. We must act to recognise that in our regulatory framework.

In recent years, the Government and the Gambling Commission have introduced a wide variety of reforms to help to protect people from gambling harm. Those include the ban on credit card gambling, the FOBT stake limit reduction, and reform to VIP schemes. The review is an opportunity to build on those changes and to do more to ensure that we have the right protections for the digital age.

As the hon. Member for Swansea East will appreciate, I cannot pre-announce what will be published in the White Paper—much as she may wish to prompt me to do so—but we are in the process of finalising it. However, I absolutely recognise the severity of the harms that gambling disorder can cause and why we all have a duty to prevent people from being led down such a dark path.

The voice of people with personal experience of harm was thoroughly represented among the submissions to our call for evidence, and I, the gambling Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp)—and all our successors have met a number of people who have suffered because of their own addictions or those of people whom they love. They have all made clear how enormous and lasting the effects of gambling disorder can be, not only in the obvious financial losses but in relationship strain, family breakdown, mental health problems and, of course, suicide in extreme cases.

As my opposite number, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), mentioned, just last week the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) secured an Adjournment debate on the coroner's finding that gambling contributed to the tragic death of Jack Ritchie. As my hon. Friend the gambling Minister said then, the findings are an important call to action for our Department, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education. We are considering the prevention of future deaths report carefully and will respond in due course on the actions being taken.

The causes of gambling-related harm are inherently complex to unpick and address. Individual circumstances play a role, but it is essential that we also look at the products, industry practices and wider factors that can contribute to or exacerbate them. Understanding the drivers and taking preventive action where it is needed is at the heart of our public health approach. Of course, understanding where it is needed is part of the challenge for the gambling review. About half of the population takes part in gambling each year, and the vast majority suffer no ill effects at all. The population “problem gambling” rate has been broadly stable since before the 2005 Act, with some recent signs of a decline. The White Paper's measures will be based on the best available evidence to target risk proportionately. We want to prevent unaffordable losses and industry practices that

exacerbate risk. We will also maintain the freedom for adults who choose to gamble to do so, and for a responsible and sustainable industry to service that demand.

Technology and data are central to developing effective and proportionate protections. As my hon. Friend the gambling Minister has said, there is huge potential in data-led tools, which can stop and prevent harmful gambling while letting the majority, who spend at low levels with no signs of risk, continue uninterrupted. There has been particular discussion in recent weeks—this was mentioned in the debate—about the role of so-called affordability checks, where a customer's financial circumstances are considered as part of assessing whether their gambling is likely to be harming them. Such assessments are undoubtedly a key part of the toolkit for preventing the devastating losses that we have all heard about, but, to be workable and prevent harm, checks need to be proportionate and acceptable to customers. We are keen to explore the role of data such as that held by credit reference agencies or that already used by operators to facilitate frictionless checks.

Aaron Bell: I am pleased that the Minister mentioned credit reference agencies, because the current state of play is that bookmakers can get only the basic data—the credit score—and cannot use the credit reference agency to find out whether people can afford their proposed levels of stake-in. Would he and the gambling Minister be receptive to a change to the law to allow bookmakers to get more granular data about someone's affordability—it would need to be done carefully—so that we do not have the intrusive checks that, as I mentioned, drive people away from licensed operators and potentially to the black market?

Nigel Huddleston: As I said, I will not pre-empt the review's findings, but my hon. Friend makes a key point about the responsibility and role of the financial services sector in the review. The Government will continue to work closely with the Gambling Commission on this issue in the run-up to publishing the White Paper.

Another much-discussed issue is data-led protection in the form of single customer views, where operators share data to protect people most at risk. That is increasingly necessary given that the average online gambler now has three accounts, and those with a gambling disorder typically have far more. I am pleased that the Betting and Gaming Council's trial of a technical solution has been accepted into the Information Commissioner's Office sandbox process, which will mean close scrutiny from both the information and gambling regulators to ensure that the trial proceeds with appropriate safeguards in place.

Let me turn now to a few other items raised by hon. Members. On the statutory levy proposals, we called for evidence on the best way to recoup the regulatory and societal costs of gambling. We have also been clear for a number of years that, should the existing system of taxation and voluntary contributions fail to deliver what was needed, we would look at a number of options for reform, including a statutory levy, and we will set out our conclusions in the White Paper.

The horse-racing industry was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson). The review is not looking directly at the horse-racing betting levy, but we are certainly aware of the close

relationship between racing and betting. The main area of concern from the horse-racing industry is the affordability checks. As I said, these are important, but they must also be proportionate, and we are carefully considering the impact of all our proposals.

Many hon. Members mentioned advertising, and gambling advertising can help licensed gambling operators differentiate themselves from the black market. It also provides financial support for broadcasters and sport, but operators must advertise responsibly, and we are committed to tackling aggressive practices. We have called for evidence on advertising and sponsorship as part of the review.

Protections are already in place to limit children's exposure to advertising—for example, the whistle-to-whistle ban mentioned by hon. Members. That led, for example, to about a halving in the number of adverts at the Euros last year compared with the 2018 World cup. Gambling adverts must not be targeted at children or appeal particularly to them. The Committee for Advertising Practice will soon publish more on its plans to tighten the rules in this area.

On the gambling black market, again mentioned by many hon. Members, we have called for evidence as part of our review, and we are looking at the Commission's powers as part of that process. On customer redress, which the hon. Member for Swansea East mentioned, operators must be held accountable for their failings. The review will assess the current system of redress, and we will set out our conclusions in the forthcoming White Paper.

The hon. Member for Swansea East also mentioned the clustering of betting shops. She will be aware that local authorities already have a range of powers under the planning system and as licensing authorities under the Gambling Act to grant or reject applications for gambling premises in their areas, and we encourage them to use those powers as appropriate. We have also been reviewing the powers local authorities and other licensing authorities have in relation to gambling premises licences as part of the review.

On the issue of treatment, which was raised by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and others, the Government absolutely take a public health approach to gambling. Gambling is a regulated sector,

and we have protections for the whole population, with rules to keep gambling fair, open and free from crime. We also have specific protections for vulnerable people. The DCMS works closely with the Department of Health and Social Care, which leads on treatment and health issues. She will be aware the Government are committed to strengthening treatment and support for gambling disorder. This will build on changes and reforms that have already taken place in recent years. The NHS has committed to opening up to 15 specialist problem gambling clinics by 2023-24. Five of these are already in operation and more will follow soon.

The hon. Member for York Central also mentioned loot boxes, and we are delivering on a manifesto commitment to tackle the issue in video games. We ran a call for evidence last year to understand the impact and received over 30,000 responses. We are reviewing this evidence and continue to engage with the industry to determine the most robust and proportionate solutions to the issues identified. We will also be publishing our response and next steps in the coming months. If she is patient, we will report on that soon.

In conclusion, I absolutely recognise that we have an important responsibility to get reform right. We will build on the many strong aspects of our regulatory system to make sure it is right for the digital age and the future. The White Paper is a priority for the Department and we will publish it in the coming weeks.

3.54 pm

Carolyn Harris: I would like to congratulate Bet365: it has mobilised speakers well today, and I hope that its protection of vulnerable customers is as tenacious as its ability to get MPs to come and speak on its behalf in a Westminster Hall debate.

The word I would take from today is “protection”. Some of us have spoken about how we want to protect vulnerable people, but others may be more inclined to protect the profits of the industry. I know which side I am on: I want to protect the lives of vulnerable people who are, on a daily basis, being exploited by this industry.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered gambling-related harm.

Smoke-free England

3.57 pm

Christina Rees (in the Chair): I will call Sir Charles Walker to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered progress towards a smoke-free England.

I will start by reading a couple of paragraphs from an excellent Government document published in July 2017, entitled “Towards a smoke-free generation”. I will not detain the Chair too long, but there are a few sentences that I want to read into the record. The document says:

“Over 200 deaths every day are still caused by smoking...Smoking rates have remained stubbornly higher amongst those in our society who already suffer from poorer health and other disadvantages. Smoking rates are almost three times higher amongst the lowest earners, compared to the highest earners...Smoking accounts for approximately half the difference in life expectancy between the richest and poorest in society. This injustice in the variation in smoking prevalence can be seen across England; from places where adult smoking is as low as 5% to others where smoking remains above 25%. The prevalence remains even higher in people with mental health conditions, where more than 40% of adults with a serious mental illness smoke. We want to address this. Our vision is nothing less than to create a smokefree generation...the government will provide leadership and guidance on the most effective interventions.”

There we have it: a bold statement of intent. So what does a smoke-free 2030 look like? First, it is not smoke-free. When we talk about a smoke-free 2030, we are actually talking about 5% or less of the adult population smoking—that is recognised by *The Lancet*. Currently, more than 14% of the adult population smoke, and it could actually be higher than 14%, because lockdown may have increased the prevalence of smoking as people turned to cigarettes as a way of releasing and relieving stress. Cancer Research UK is not optimistic about the 2030 date, which will not come as a surprise to anyone here. Its best guess is that 2037 is when we will achieve 5% or less, and I am afraid the general view is that 2037 now looks optimistic.

To put it in context, what is 200 deaths a day? That is 75,000 deaths a year and, on top of that, 500,000 admissions to hospital every year for smoking-related illnesses. Over 10 years, 750,000 people will die from smoking. That is approximately the population of Birmingham every 10 years, and 5 million people will be admitted to hospital.

The Government touch on the huge disparities in smoking between richer and less well-off areas. In some of the most deprived wards in seaside towns in the north-west, smoking rates are above 22%. In the leafy parts of Surrey, they are less than 5%—in essence, parts of Surrey have achieved smoke-free status. What does 22% versus 5% look like? That translates into about an eight-year differential in life expectancy. Of course, not all that eight-year differential will be linked to smoking but, as the Government identified in their report in 2017, about 50%—four years—of that differential will be linked to the fact that more people smoke in more deprived areas than wealthier ones.

Look, the Government have made great strides. I will not be churlish with the Minister—I would not be churlish with her, because she is a very nice woman and she is very committed to this cause, which is more important than being nice.

I understand that a pack of cigarettes now costs more than £10, although that is not something I have bought for 17 years. Some might be pushing £14, so this is becoming an expensive habit. Even at that price, 14% or more of the population are smoking. We are down to some really tough nuts to crack, if we want to reach that 5%. I remind the Government of the part of the report entitled, “Backing evidence-based innovation”:

“Despite the availability of effective medicines and treatments to support quit attempts, the majority of smokers choose to quit unassisted, by going ‘cold turkey’. This has proved to be the least effective method...The best thing a smoker can do for their health is to quit smoking. However, the evidence is increasingly clear that e-cigarettes are significantly less harmful to health than smoking tobacco. The Government will seek to support consumers in stopping smoking and adopting the use of less harmful nicotine products.”

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on this Adjournment debate. He may know that I have never smoked, but I am a strong advocate of vaping. Does he agree that, if the Government are serious about reducing smoking prevalence, they must ensure that medical professionals have access to the latest evidence on e-cigarettes and are encouraged to signpost patients to appropriate guidance about harm reduction, as well as information about how to switch successfully, if they cannot quit?

Sir Charles Walker: Of course, I agree with and endorse what the hon. Lady said—on this occasion, let me call her my hon. Friend—because what we are talking about today is harm reduction.

Let me read two more sentences, from page 15 of the report, which I am sure will be of interest to the hon. Lady:

“The Government will therefore continue to evaluate critically the evidence on nicotine-delivery products, providing clear communication about what is known and unknown about the short and long-term risks of using different products relative to smoking and the absolute risk to children, non-smokers and bystanders.”

Remember that that was written five years ago, so there has surely been time to do this.

What I do not understand is why the Government are so squeamish when it comes to looking at harm reduction. The hon. Member for North Tyneside talks about vaping, but there are nicotine pouches, “heat not burn” products and something called snus, which I understand is used in parts of the world. Before we cast these alternatives aside, let us remember that they reduce the harm caused to the user. There is nothing more harmful than smoking burnt, lit, combustible tobacco—nothing. Sweden has taken an enlightened approach. It has embraced science and looked at harm reduction. Smoking rates are now well below 10%, and some independent experts reckon they are nearer 7%. It looks like Sweden is going to be the first country in Europe to meet the magical 4.99% and be a smoke-free European country.

I am concerned that we are not going at this problem as hard as we should as a nation, but there is hope, which I am sure the Minister will refer to in her speech.

There is the independent review of smoke-free 2030 policies, led by Mr Javed Khan OBE. The review offers reasons for optimism. In its objectives it states:

“The review will make a set of focused policy and regulatory recommendations in 2 areas, and will consider...the most impactful interventions to reduce the uptake of smoking, particularly among young people.”

It will also consider

“the top interventions to support smoking cessation, particularly in deprived areas of England where there are significant health disparities”.

That sounds like a call to arms. On outputs, the review says:

“The review will provide a far-reaching report focused on the key policy and regulatory recommendations that give the government the best chance of achieving the Smokefree 2030 ambition and addressing the health disparities associated with smoking.”

Can I make a plea to the Minister and her Department? This issue is harm reduction. It is about reducing the 75,000 deaths a year. It is about reducing the 500,000 people who go into hospital. It is not about banishing nicotine.

In a perfect world, nobody would even chew nicotine gum, but the fact is that they do. We do not live in a perfect world. People become addicted to nicotine, and it becomes part of their day. It is far better to consume it in a way that offers a much lesser chance of either shortening someone's life or putting them in hospital. Let us use the regulatory and tax environments to differentiate harms, so that the highest harm is combustible tobacco and we can gradate the level of harm going down. We can use the tax system to signpost people to the least harmful nicotine product.

I would like to conclude by saying one thing. Levelling up has to mean reducing the disparities in people's life expectancy. One of the greatest disparities is in those who suffer from a diagnosis of psychosis/schizophrenia. By the Government's own reckoning, 40% of people with the diagnosis—possibly more—smoke. I know about this because I have been deeply involved in the issue of mental health since I entered Parliament 17 years ago. Smoking is often linked to the treatments used to help people with psychosis/schizophrenia—sadly often still called the chemical cosh. The treatments tend to enhance appetite, so people experience massive weight gain. They also tend to depress the person in receipt of the medications, which drives them to smoking. On average, if someone has a diagnosis of psychosis/schizophrenia, their life expectancy is reduced by 15 years—the Government say in their document that it is between 10 and 20 years. This is a real issue for so many people. This is not a “nice to have” harm reduction; it is an absolute necessity. I thank you, Ms Rees, and the Minister for allowing me to make the case for harm reduction today.

4.10 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Rees. I am not sure I can be as passionate as my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), but I am convinced that we in the UK are standing on the brink of a huge opportunity to get this right in the very near future. Some 3 million people vape today, which is wonderful compared with 3 million people smoking, and approximately 6 million, maybe 7 million, continue to smoke. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, that leads

to 75,000 deaths a year, or 200 people every single day. The number of people who have died from vaping is zero. So when we look at the plain stats on this, we can ask, “Do we want 200 people per day to continue to die through smoking rates continuing as they are, or do we want to have zero people dying per day?” My answer to that is pretty clear.

There is some good news, which I will come to in a moment. I have great respect for the Minister; I know she has heard these arguments many times before, and she always takes them with such grace, but I will go through a couple of negatives before I come to the positives—I am equal to my hon. Friend in my optimism for the future.

I chair the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, a fantastic, impartial organisation that produces science briefings for parliamentarians and their research staff. We produced a POSTnote on electronic cigarettes. In 2013, only one in 20 people thought that vaping was as harmful as smoking. That was really encouraging, but in 2016 we observed that about one in four people thought vaping was as harmful as, if not more harmful than, smoking. We have been going backwards, and today about 53% of people think that vaping is as harmful as smoking. Something is very wrong when the information flow has reversed in such a short space of time for something that was only introduced to the UK about 15 years ago, so we really need to get a handle on that problem.

There is a simple test when it comes to smoking. Lots of people say, “Oh, I like smoking. I wish we had the freedom to smoke,” and I agree entirely: you can kill yourself with your own poison, and that is fine by me. However, when a smoker is asked, “Would you like your children to smoke?” the answer is always, “Oh gosh, no. I would want them to have them the freedom to do it, but I would really rather they didn't.” I have tried this, and it says an awful lot. It says that smokers—I was one—do not want to smoke; they stumbled into it in their youth or at a time when they thought they would be able to escape from its clutches. The truth of the matter is that nobody really wants to smoke.

With vaping, snus, and non-combustible tobacco, which may be more harmful than vaping, but is nowhere near as harmful as smoking, we have a huge opportunity to embrace newer technologies and approaches, and I know the Minister is keen to do so however she can. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne that harm reduction is the key here. Why have 200 people dying per day when we could have zero dying per day? Why hold on to the idea that anything we can do to move people from smoking to vaping, snus or one of those other products should be slowed down in any way?

On balance, I am quite optimistic for the future. I am optimistic because the Minister is in her post, but also because the Javed Khan review appears to be going in the right direction. It appears to recognise that we cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the very near perfect, which vaping appears to be at this stage. Also, whether we voted remain or leave, we are now outside the strictures of the European Union and its directives. We have full autonomy and full power to head in any direction we choose, and I ask for that direction to be informed by the evidence, the data, the science, Javed Khan's review, and what is self-evident before our very eyes—that people do not die from vaping, full stop.

[Adam Afriyie]

I am also optimistic because we have a couple of other opportunities. We have the opportunity as a Government—the UK Government—to direct a little bit of funding at research, because there are some unanswered questions about the long-term effects of vaping and these other products. We could direct or nudge a little bit of research funding in that direction. It would not cost a fortune. A small amount could be dedicated to a longitudinal study of the outcomes. I think that such a study would put the final few sceptical academics' minds at rest—or not, as the case may be—when we got the results.

This morning I was at a meeting on this subject with Demos, which is producing a study of this issue and some recommendations for policy. One message that came through loud and clear from the healthcare professionals was, “Give us the opportunity to try this, at least in a limited way, maybe in a limited area or perhaps just with pregnant women, because it is very clear that vaping is far better than smoking during pregnancy. Give us an opportunity, maybe in a restricted location, a particular area or with a particular demographic, to try the approach of switching people to vaping, and let's see if that works better than trying to get them to stop smoking during pregnancy or in any other circumstances that they are in.”

There is another wonderful opportunity here. This is bizarre—absolutely bizarre—but I love to say that, bizarrely, the tobacco industry in the west is behind switching to vaping. I say to the Minister that actually the industry is ready to put its hands in its pocket and pay for a lot of this work, which is absolutely extraordinary. I think the industry recognises that its business model will not continue to succeed in the west, including in the UK, and we should be mindful that it is prepared to put its hands in its pocket to help the transition—not for altruistic reasons, of course; it will be because the industry is switching its business model more towards non-combustible and vaping products. It may also be because some of the cigarette manufacturers would like to look in the longer term at these inhaling systems as a way to deliver medicine—not smoking or vaping, but delivering all sorts of other products. The tobacco industry has a profit motive, but this is the first time that I have known it to be potentially aligned with UK policy and we should certainly take advantage of that.

I could go on for ever, but I will not do so. What I would say in summary is this: do not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. It is a really good thing to do to push in this direction. There is very little pushback from anywhere. I plead with the Government to consider the information flow as part of the judgments that they will make in the near term, because if more people today than in 2016 think that vaping is more harmful than smoking, then clearly something is very seriously wrong with the information processes.

I have a last question, which basically is: how do we get to smokers? We might think, “Oh, we don't want to advertise these things online and on television.” Well of course not; we have to keep children and advertising to children out of the mix when it comes to these products. There is a really simple way to get to smokers though: every single smoker has to open their box of cigarettes,

so have something inside the box. It is really simple and it only targets those people who continue to smoke, so let us get on with it.

Minister, thank you very much for listening. Sir Charles, thanks for calling this debate, and thank you, Ms Rees, for calling me to speak.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) for calling this important debate. I am grateful to him for his contribution and I am grateful to other Members who share the Government's ambition for Britain to be smoke-free by 2030. My hon. Friend is correct when he says that that means 5% of people smoking, but it would still be a great achievement to get from where we are now to just 5%. The UK is a world-leader on tobacco control and we now have one of the lowest smoking rates in the world. According to my records, only 13.5% of people in the UK smoke, but that percentage is still too high. As he stated so passionately, the Government know there is still so much more to do.

We know that there are still around 6 million smokers in England and that smoking remains the single biggest cause of preventable mortality; two out of three long-term smokers will die from smoking. We also know that smoking is one of the largest drivers of health disparities and that the burden of tobacco harms is not shared equally. Smoking rates are far higher in poorer areas of the country, as my hon. Friend said, and among lower socioeconomic groups. We can see smoking rates of 23% in more deprived areas, compared with rates of 8% in wealthier ones. In addition, one in 10 pregnant women still smoke, increasing the risk of health problems for their babies. Smoking prevalence among people with long-term mental health conditions is also far too high, at over 25%.

My hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) raised the issue of smoking during pregnancy. The decline there has not fallen in line with other groups, so we know that more needs to be done. We continue to explore options to support smoking cessation in pregnant women; those options will be set out in our tobacco control plan and they are also part of our NHS long-term plan. We know that it is not just the woman who needs support; it is her partner as well. We must continue to help those groups in all the ways we can.

What are we doing? In 2019 the Government set the bold ambition for England to be smoke-free by 2030. To support that, we have been building on the successes of our current tobacco control plan, and later this year we will publish a new plan with an even sharper focus on tackling health disparities. The new plan will set out a comprehensive package of new policy proposals and regulatory change. To help push those ambitions forward, the Government have commissioned an independent review of our tobacco control policies, led by Javed Khan, the former CEO of Barnardo's. The review will assess the most impactful interventions to help us achieve our goal of being smoke-free by 2030. I know that Javed Khan has some really ambitious ideas that I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne will welcome.

More needs to be done to prevent young people from taking up smoking and to protect our future generations from its devastating harms. More also needs to be done

to support current smokers to quit, especially in deprived communities and among the priority groups. Smoking, and the grip it has on our society, must become a thing of the past. I am confident that the Khan review will give us the focus and political support to do so. I encourage all hon. Members to contribute to the review so that we can hear as wide a range of views as possible. We are open to bold new ideas about how to reach our smoke-free ambitions. Hon. Members have talked about the role of reduced-risk products. The Government are supportive of smokers using less harmful nicotine delivery systems to quit or switch away from the most harmful form—combustible tobacco.

Mary Glindon: This week is the beginning of VApril, which is a campaign run by the industry to support smokers who are looking to quit. Would the Minister support efforts to encourage adult smokers to quit by speaking with local authority stop smoking services, this month in particular, and highlight the role of e-cigarettes in reducing harm?

Maggie Throup: The hon. Lady—I will call her my hon. Friend—speaks passionately about vaping, and we have had those conversations before. We know and acknowledge that reduced-risk products are not risk-free, but vaping is a way to help people stop smoking and it has been proven to be effective. We must continue to ensure that the products do not appeal to young people and non-smokers—that is really important. However, we need to get the message out that vaping is an effective way to stop smoking. Balanced and proportionate regulation is required as we shift to different products. We have an innovative and varied nicotine market in the UK, as has been mentioned; vapes are by far the most popular alternative source of nicotine, but there are also patches, gums and, more recently, nicotine pouches.

We want to see more smokers using vapes to quit, which I know is in line with the wishes of the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon). She mentioned earlier the possibility of vaping and e-cigarettes being available on prescription, and the Secretary of State has spoken of his desire to see those products routinely prescribed by the NHS. That is something that we need to move forward with. My hon. Friend the Member for Windsor raised the important issue of the perception of vaping and how it has changed. That is something I will take away and consider.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): The Minister talks about the range of alternative products, such as vapes, “heat not burn” and other things that already exist, and about the statistics on people’s perceptions of the health impacts of those products. We know that those products are less harmful, so does she agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) said about the importance of getting that information out to people—even if it is as simple as a slip of paper in a cigarette packet? I like to think that a Conservative Government, rather than seeking to ban things, could empower people to make that choice through information. We could certainly do more to get that information out there.

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend is quite right. It is important that we communicate the other ways people can stop smoking and, as the hon. Member for North Tyneside said, do so in such a powerful way. As Members of Parliament, we all have a role in getting those messages out, and I am sure that everybody in this room will be doing their bit in VApril to get that message through to the public. It is about messaging and about people understanding the impact smoking has, not just on their lives but on other people’s lives as well.

I am also aware of the desire to bring snus to the UK market to give smokers further choice of less harmful alternatives. Considering the range of alternative nicotine products that can be accessed by smokers, the Government are not currently minded to introduce a new tobacco product to the UK market. Current alternative products such as nicotine pouches deliver nicotine in an identical way to snus but do not contain any tobacco. We will continue to consider the evidence around snus and we welcome additional non-tobacco reduced-risk products to the UK market.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne again for calling this important debate and for hon. Members’ interesting contributions to the discussion. We have packed a lot into 30 minutes. I hope to be able to tell the House more in the coming months about the specific policies that will deliver our ambitious agenda for a smoke-free England. The end is in sight through a sustained and multi-pronged approach. I hope we can look forward to a future for our children without the death and misery that is caused by smoking.

Question put and agreed to.

4.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

Great British Railways Headquarters: Crewe Bid

4.30 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Crewe's bid for the headquarters of Great British Railways.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I am proud to be here today on behalf of the people and businesses of Crewe, and to have this opportunity to showcase and explain to the Minister all the reasons why Crewe should be the home of Great British Railways' new headquarters.

Crewe is at the heart of rail, and rail is at the heart of Crewe. Today I will talk about how Crewe's heritage, local rail industry and connectivity, combined with the value for money it can offer and the opportunities to level up for Crewe's people, make it an unbeatable choice for the GBR HQ.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I strongly support my hon. Friend's enthusiastic bid on behalf of Crewe. When considering a property, three matters are important: location, location and location. Does he therefore agree that Crewe's geography makes it ideally suited to be the home of GBR? It is centrally located, with direct rail links not only to the south, the midlands and the north of England, but to Scotland and Wales.

Dr Mullan: I agree with my hon. Friend and thank her for coming to give her support today. It is about Crewe's 360-degree connectivity, which is unrivalled when it comes to towns and other places seeking to become the home of the new GBR HQ.

Crewe was born from the railways. The decision by the Grand Junction Railway Company in 1837 to invest in a new station, which connected the Liverpool and Manchester railways and the London and Birmingham railways, transformed the village of Crewe into the railway town it is today, and the town's growth has been linked to the railways ever since. The station was built alongside the Crewe Locomotive Works, which went on to become the largest locomotive works in the world. The first locomotive produced at Crewe Works was rolled out on 20 October 1843. The first locomotive produced at Crewe was given the number 32 and the name Tamerlane. The outline of the engines was very different from all previous designs and became known generally as the Crewe type, which lasted for many years. By the time locomotive production came to an end in the 1990s, more than 8,000 locomotives had been built in Crewe, with the site employing more than 20,000 people at its height. From speaking to constituents, I have met countless people whose families worked in the railway industry. Often multiple generations of the same local families have done so and continue to this day, with the Crewe Works site still active.

This rich heritage is to be seen all over the town. Opened in 1888, the beautiful Queen's Park in the heart of Crewe was a gift to the town from the London and North Western Railway Company, to mark the joint occasion of the Queen's jubilee and the 50th anniversary of the opening of the grand junction railway. The Crewe Heritage Centre was officially opened by Her

Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh on 24 July 1987 to mark the 150th anniversary of the first train to arrive at Crewe railway station in 1837.

From steam trains to electrification and diesel programmes, Crewe's rail connections, combined with its engineering workforce, has bound Crewe to the railway industry for generations, so it is no surprise that I can talk confidently and proudly about the amazing modern railway industry sector, built from this legacy, that now inhabits the town. Some 7% of the English railway workforce are based in Crewe, despite Crewe having just 0.1% of the population. The workforce is spread across an amazingly diverse range of businesses. Avanti, Arriva TrainCare, Train Bits and More, Jacobs, Freightliner, DB Cargo, Direct Rail Services, Alstom, Unipart Rail, Locomotive Services Ltd, Keltbray and more all operate in Crewe, and it is the headquarters for many. Alstom recently won the contract for the production of the bogies for HS2 at the original Crewe Works site. Freightliner has invested millions in a new maintenance facility for freight locomotives, while the Avanti West Coast partnership has established its nationwide talent academy in Crewe.

Crewe has retained and attracted many of the rail and rail supply chain businesses as they have innovated and evolved, meaning that it is well positioned and ready to be at the centre of rail reform and innovation throughout the 21st century and beyond. Looking to the future, the presence of the Crewe Engineering and Design UTC and the Institute of Technology at Cheshire College creates an opportunity for Crewe to be known as a centre of excellence for rail skills, capturing existing rail expertise and wider complementary skills to teach the next generation. All of this is placed at the most well-connected railway hub in the country. Crewe is a connector to major cities and towns across England and the Union, with six railway lines offering 360-degree connectivity. It is the only station on the main line that is connected to all the regional capitals, with direct connections to Edinburgh and Glasgow, and connections across Wales, allowing a GBR HQ based in Crewe to play its role in strengthening the Union.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent and compelling case for the GBR HQ to be based in Crewe. He will appreciate that I am also aware of the deep pride and passion that the people of Crewe have for their railway heritage, and they want a future for that important part of our transport infrastructure. Does he agree that one advantage of have the GBR HQ in Crewe is that officials and the great team that will be assembled there will become very familiar with the integrated rail system in and around Crewe, including between Crewe and Chester and other parts of Cheshire, and we could have something that is fit for the 21st century, not least a new station at Beeston Castle and Tarporley?

Dr Mullan: I do indeed agree with my hon. Friend, and I thank him for his support for the bid to have the GBR HQ in Crewe.

More than 3 million people live within a 45-minute commute by road and rail and there are 12 major universities within an hour's commute of Crewe. Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham are all within an hour's

commute by rail, reducing to less than 30 minutes when HS2 arrives. There are up to 40 services between Crewe and London each day and journey times as fast as 90 minutes, reducing to 55 minutes when HS2 arrives.

Fiona Bruce: Of course, rail transport can take traffic off the motorways, notably the M6. I would be delighted to see the bid succeed because it would strengthen the case for reopening Middlewich railway station in my constituency of Congleton.

Dr Mullan: I fully support that ambition, because we all know how important local railway connections are, alongside the big intercity connections. I see on the roads in and around Crewe that challenge of freight and transport. The more we can get on to the railways, the better.

Crewe has connections to three international airports, making it the perfect place for engaging with the railway industry internationally. Importantly, that connectivity extends beyond passenger connections. As we have mentioned, Crewe is also a key strategic hub for the rail freight industry, with connections to ports servicing both the Irish sea and the Atlantic. Basing the GBR HQ at Crewe will send a clear message to the rail industry that the value and importance of rail freight is front and centre of the Government's ambitions for our railways. There is no better place in the UK than Crewe to connect with all areas of the country, north to south and across the borders.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and for making such a powerful case. Crewe is a railway town, as hon. Members have said. A successful bid will power up Cheshire, so we are here, cross-party, to speak on its behalf, which gives the bid even more credibility, but it goes beyond Cheshire and the north-west. Indeed, it powers up our great nation, so I commend the hon. Member on his campaign. I hope the Minister listens and makes the correct, informed decision. The bid has cross-party support from both councils in Cheshire East and Cheshire West, and from all the local MPs, regardless of our political persuasion.

Dr Mullan: I thank the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for his support. As he says, the bid has cross-party support from councils and Members of Parliament. It would be a benefit not only to Crewe, but to the wider region.

I want to talk about what the GBR HQ coming to Crewe will do for the people of Crewe as well as for GBR. As I have mentioned, Crewe's growth has often been tied to the railways. As locomotive manufacturing in the UK faded, although the community spirit and heritage remained, in some respects Crewe's fortunes faded as well. Six out of Crewe's 13 wards are in the 10% of most deprived nationally, concentrated around the town centre. There is a £5,000 gap between household earnings in Crewe compared with the Cheshire East average, and 8.4% of 16 to 17-year-olds in central Crewe are not in education, employment or training, compared with a Cheshire East average of 2.3%.

We are already seeing benefits from the Government's levelling-up agenda, which the awarding of GBR can build on and cement. We have a Crewe town deal, funding for an institute of technology, and of course

the HS2 hub. Importantly, while all of those are positives, they would not replicate the investment that GBR represents. The area around the station has been allocated as the HS2 station hub strategic employment site, providing opportunities for new investment in high-grade office space, with a hotel and amenities unlike anything else currently available in Crewe. GBR has the opportunity to become the landmark occupier, helping to cement the scheme and shape the future regeneration of Crewe.

This journey of regeneration represents opportunities for GBR as well. As the Minister will see from the bid put forward by Cheshire East Council, there are several locations where the GBR headquarters could be placed in Crewe, all within a short walking distance of the station, other railway industry offices in Crewe and, importantly, the HS2 development. There are many plots that are ready for staff to move into, involving little work and making the move very straightforward. Importantly, office rents in Crewe are 84% to 87% lower than in Birmingham or Manchester and would be much cheaper than many competing areas for the headquarters.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for his passionate campaign for Great British Railways. The GBR headquarters have sparked a tremendous amount of debate and interest from colleagues across the House. Naturally, I am supporting my campaign for Darlington, where it all began, to be the home of GBR. Does he agree that, given the level of interest and the opportunity to extol the virtues of all our respective constituencies, if the Government could find time for the Minister to respond to a debate on the Floor of the House, that would be a tremendous opportunity for all of us to tell our stories and showcase everything that the United Kingdom has to offer?

Dr Mullan: I agree with my hon. Friend that it is not just in Crewe that this opportunity has galvanised communities. I am going to talk about how my community feels about it, but to give that full airing in a main debate in the Chamber would be a fantastic opportunity for so many Members to showcase the strength of feeling in their local areas.

Although there are other options, the value for money that Crewe offers will be difficult to beat. I know that the Minister will care deeply about the staff who are going to work there and want to know that they will have opportunities as well. Crewe is not only more affordable for office space; it is also more affordable when it comes to house prices, which are 39% cheaper than the UK average and 19% cheaper than the north-west average for a semi-detached house. That is not to take away from Crewe, however, as it has been ranked in the top three residential locations for the past three years by *Property Week*, and Cheshire East has been ranked as one of the top places to live in the north-west.

I can personally vouch for Crewe, as I live and work in the area myself. It is not short of cultural assets, such as the Crewe Lyceum theatre, Crewe Market Hall, Crewe Lifestyle Centre and Crewe Alex FC. It is also in close proximity to vibrant market towns such as Nantwich, Sandbach, Knutsford and Wilmslow. Additionally, Cheshire's nearby Peak district encompasses nearly 100 square miles of beautiful scenery. GBR staff will be able to make a home in Crewe affordably and enjoy what Crewe and the whole region have to offer.

[Dr Mullan]

Taking all that into account, the Minister will understand why there is enormous support for the bid in my constituency. Crewe's population is proud of the town's railway heritage. From the day the competition was announced, I received emails and letters from constituents asking me to do everything possible to get the win for Crewe. The results of an online survey conducted by the *Crewe Chronicle* found that 97% of respondents were in favour of the arrival of GBR in Crewe. The *Chronicle* and *Crewe Nub News* are both giving their full support to the bid, alongside cross-party support from all the local party leaders and local councillors.

They are joined by cross-party support from 12 MPs from Stoke, Cheshire and Warrington. I thank every one of them for their support and those who have turned up to voice their support today. As well as Cheshire East Council and Crewe Town Council, we have the support of neighbouring Cheshire West Council in Chester and Warrington Council. The local football team and its supporters' club, the RailwayMen, are geared up to get out the vote and, of course, Pete Waterman is continuing his long history of advocating for the railways in Crewe by being front and centre of our bid.

The Crewe town board and its chair, Doug Kinsman, have come to embody ambition for Crewe. They all support our bid alongside South Cheshire chamber of commerce and Cheshire College. We all look forward to the public vote and the opportunity to showcase that public support in full.

I hope that the Minister has enjoyed hearing about the strengths of our bid; about our rich rail heritage dating back to the 1800s; about our historical and modern railway industry locally; about our connectivity in the here and now, and in the future with HS2, connecting across our great nation and connecting for freight as well as passengers; about the opportunities to find a home for GBR that is affordable for the taxpayer and for the people who will work there, able to enjoy everything that Cheshire has to offer; and about the opportunities for GBR to help Crewe in return, as it continues to face challenges in the post-industrial era.

I finish by thanking the leaders of the political groups on Cheshire East Council and the staff and team at Cheshire East Council and the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership for their hard work on the bid, and all those in the community and industry locally who have helped to ensure that it is the best it can be. It is a bid that Crewe can be proud of, and one that I know all of Crewe is behind. On 4 July 2022, we will mark 185 years since the first train arrived in Crewe. It will be fitting for that anniversary to be marked by the announcement of Crewe becoming the home of Great British Railways.

4.45 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I congratulate my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), on that excellent speech. In fact, so comprehensive and passionate was his statement that he has not left much for the rest of us to say. With the greatest respect to other hon. Members, I must say that this is an obvious choice, for the very

reasons the hon. Gentleman spoke about: the absolute intertwining of our railway history with Crewe's history. Crewe is the original railway town. With the greatest respect to those areas in the north-east that might claim the first railway, the first railway town was Crewe.

I want to supplement and complement my hon. Friend's speech with some reflections of my own, having grown up in Cheshire, and having spent lots of time at Crewe station—perhaps a bit more at the moment, since Avanti dropped most of its services between Chester and London, but more of that later. As a Cheshire man born and bred, when I arrive at Crewe from the south, whether from the west midlands via Stafford, down the London line or even across the east midlands on the route that goes over towards Stoke and Derby, I always feel like I am coming home. When I was a youngster, Greenall Whitley, the local brewery at the time, said “You are now entering Greenall Whitley land. Please set your clocks to local time.” It was to the south of the station, just by Basford Hall sidings, for many years. When I saw that, I knew I was almost home.

As a child, I visited one of the open days at Crewe railway works, which was a huge, sprawling site in those days. I have a certain sadness that it has contracted as much as it has. It now spreads along the line to Chester and north Wales on the right-hand side going out, but it is not nearly as big as it used to be. The hon. Gentleman talked about the changes in the railway structure—I think part of it is now a Morrisons, and the Eagle Bridge housing estate, which takes its name from the railway bridge that went over from the old railway works over to the old Crewe electric railway depot to the north-west of the station. The diesel depot was just to the south of the station on the way out to Basford Hall and on the railway line down towards Shrewsbury and mid-Cheshire.

Just by remembering that, I am emphasising the point that the hon. Gentleman made about this 360-degree view that Crewe has of our railway system. It is great connectivity. Obviously, I am particularly interested in the line to Chester and then off to north Wales. I was speaking to the Wales Minister, and hopefully I will speak to the Transport Minister at some point about improving the services on that after the pandemic.

As I say, Avanti has been dragging its feet and it is unacceptable. Constituents are moaning—as much as they love Crewe and want to support the bid, they do not want to have to spend too much time changing at the railway station. But if they have to spend it anywhere, they may as well spend it at Crewe. It is so well connected: up to Scotland, both Glasgow and Edinburgh; down to Birmingham; across to south Wales with direct services that go through Herefordshire and Worcestershire; across to the east midlands as far as Newark and further, with direct services including Nottingham, Derby and Stoke; obviously, straight down to London; through to Birmingham and to the south-west. Again, there are direct cross-country services. The idea of connectivity absolutely makes sense.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich talked about HS2. He has been involved in recent years and he knows that we had to battle at times to get the HS2 hub for Crewe, but we think we have secured it now and we will get the services that will allow the full economic benefits of HS2 to spread out not just across the northern midlands and Staffordshire, but across Cheshire, which

is why there has been a joint campaign by all Members of Parliament and local councils and the local enterprise partnership. That joint work is reflected in the current campaign, in which the hon. Gentleman is playing a leading role. The Crewe hub has political support from across the county and across political parties, as well as business support.

There is another aspect, which the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich did not touch upon. I support HS2 completely and think it is a great idea, but it cannot simply be a fast link between cities that allows those cities to grow. Without deviating from the subject of the debate, Crewe offers an opportunity to share the benefits of HS2 outside the cities. I make that point because I hope the Minister will reflect on the fact that there will be big cities that will bid for the headquarters of Great British Railways, but there will also be towns where perhaps benefits have not been shared fairly or which have not benefited from so much economic growth. Crewe is a perfect example of a town, as opposed to a city, where the headquarters would make a real difference and the benefits would spread out across the whole of my county, which is why we are so keen to have it. I would be grateful if the Minister could take fair notice of the idea of sharing the growth not just among the big cities, but among the towns.

Having the headquarters would be a mark of prestige for Cheshire, and this is a prestigious bid for us. However, as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich said, it would also be a good move for Great British Railways. It would find a welcoming county that has much to offer. Yes, Crewe is a railway town but it is also a great place to live and to do business. I have no doubt that in Crewe, as well as in the wider county, Great British Railways will find a warm welcome and a real home.

We have talked about house prices and amenities in Crewe. If the hon. Gentleman will let me say so, the employees of Great British Railways could also come and live in Chester, which is only about 20 minutes down the line, when we get a connecting train. As a Cestrian and a Cheshire man myself, I would encourage the employees of Great British Railways, when they come, to look at Cheshire as a really welcoming place.

I finish by giving my warm support and using the phrase with which the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich began his speech—it had occurred to me, but he put it so well. Crewe is at the geographical heart of this nation's railways, but this nation's railways are absolutely at the heart of Crewe. It is a town and ours is an area that fundamentally understand and are grateful for the contribution that the railways have made. I fully support the campaign, headed by the hon. Gentleman and Cheshire East Council, and I hope the Minister will give fair consideration to this fantastic bid.

4.53 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Rees.

I commend the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) for his staunch support for his constituency and the bid that has led to this important debate. I thank all Members for their important contributions and their obvious passion and support for Crewe and Nantwich.

I know that many Members across the House share the hon. Gentleman's passion for ensuring Great British Railways is based in their own constituency, so while the hon. Gentleman might tempt me into backing his specific bid, it is important that due process is taken to ensure the most suitable location. Indeed, over 40 separate bids have been launched across the country to be the new home of Great British Railways, including a bid in my own region of South Yorkshire. I am sure the Minister will reassure me that all bids will be carefully considered on their merits and not on the political benefits of the Conservative party, as some believe they have seen in the past.

Crewe has put forward an excellent bid. As the leader of Cheshire East Council Councillor Corcoran notes, Crewe is

“a rail town through and through”

that has

“rail at the heart of the town.”

As the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich has detailed, Crewe has proud and historic roots when it comes to our rail network. It is often described as the most historically significant railway station in the world. Crewe railway station was opened in 1837 and is a grade II listed building. The grand junction railway, built to connect Birmingham to a junction with Manchester and Liverpool, opened the same year with the station taking its name from the nearby Crewe Hall. Since then, the town has largely been built by and for the railway.

Today, Crewe is a proud town with a rich and influential history in rail. Even now, Crewe is a vital interchange for our railways and will form an integral part of the integrated rail plan. It is also the birthplace of the Crewe locomotive works, which went on to become one of the largest locomotive works in the world. More than 7,000 steam locomotives were produced there prior to the expansive diesel locomotive production. In fact, the work was so influential that engine design was known as the Crewe type for many years, making it one of our proud historic British manufacturing hubs.

Indeed, British manufacturing and procurement should be at the very heart of the formation of Great British Railways and the implementation of the integrated rail plan. For example, we must ensure that HS2 is procuring British-made steel and that the new HQ guarantees local jobs. The driving force for change on our railways should be centred on benefits it can bring to local people. That is why I strongly welcome the Government's commitment to ensuring that Great British Railways is based outside London, where communities have felt overlooked for far too long when it comes to funding, infrastructure and Government attention. I urge the Minister to ensure that this new HQ is not simply a token gesture but provides genuine investment and jobs in the chosen location. Can the Minister confirm today exactly how many jobs she expects there to be at the new Great British Railways HQ?

On the Opposition Benches, we want to see Great British Railways become a success for the industry and passengers. However, without the much-needed detail on this matter, I feel the Government may pull back on their promises and funding, as seen previously. The current plans as they stand are already not going far enough. As my colleagues have consistently outlined, Great British Railways will privatise the profit but

[Gill Furniss]

nationalise the risk. The truth is that taxpayers' money has been consistently misplaced when it comes to our railways. The Government prefer to pay extortionate consultancy fees and bleed profits into the pockets of operators, which go to subsidise the rail network of other nations at the expense of our own. We should be seeing the Government re-establishing 21,000 cut services, properly funding Transport for the North and halting the £1 billion cut from Network Rail. I urge the Minister to ensure that the promises she has made on Great British Railways are delivered in full.

The industry needs clarity on the detail of what Great British Railways will look like. Can the Minister ensure that is shared as swiftly as possible? The Government's unwillingness to nail down the details and provide a definitive direction for the future of our railways has risked stakeholder confidence. That risks leaving a lack of leadership when it has come to vital areas of our network such as electrification, digital signalling and rolling stock, which requires decades of planning.

While it is encouraging to see such enthusiasm about the future of our railways, I wish Government funding would match those ambitions. Encouraging people back to affordable, reliable and flexible services should be the Government's priority when establishing Great British Railways, wherever it finds its home. Crewe certainly offers an excellent prospect for the Department, but I hope its expectations of what this opportunity can offer are fulfilled by the Government. I wish Crewe the best of luck with the bid. No matter the outcome, the rich rail heritage is certainly something the people of Crewe can be very proud of, and the same can be said for the passionate support shown by all hon. Members taking part in the debate.

4.59 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Rees. Before I respond to the debate more broadly and to hon. Members, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) for securing this debate. Only a few weeks ago, I was here debating the merits of Carnforth as a potential location for the Great British Railways headquarters. This is the fourth debate on this subject, with previous bids being for Darlington, as my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) will recall, and for York. It has been heartening to listen to these debates, and to hear hon. Members from up and down the country engaging in an important conversation and debate about the future of our railways, supporting bids from their towns and cities. We have heard examples of outstanding work, and I know there are many others.

As I said in the earlier debate, railways are close to my heart. Both of my paternal great-grandfathers worked on the railways, one on the Wensleydale railway and the other in County Durham. I found out recently, since becoming rail Minister, that my dad was born in a railway cottage. In my own way, I like to think that I have a bit of rail heritage in my blood. I understand the importance of the railway industry and the amazingly rich rail heritage of this country.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich set out, Crewe has a proud rail heritage. Indeed, the Grand Junction Railway Company chose Crewe as the

site for its locomotive works, as we have heard, and a railway station. Crewe was a small village and the railways transformed it into the vibrant railway town that we know today. The opening of the famous Crewe Works in 1840 heralded an era of tremendous growth for the town. When the Grand Junction Railway Company became a part of London and North Western Railway, one of the largest companies in the world at the time, Crewe Works found itself at the centre of its locomotive construction and maintenance.

Since 1837, the historic Crewe railway station has helped transform the town, as we have heard today, connecting Crewe to the rest of the UK and the wider world. It remains an important transport hub today. From the earliest days of the railways through to the modern day, Crewe has and will continue to play an important part of the railways in this country. Of course, my mailbox is evidence that there are many other towns and cities across the country that have played an important part in our railway heritage, which hon. Members are equally proud to represent. The response to this competition has been positive. I am pleased to say that, by the time the competition had closed on 16 March, we had received 42 applications, which is phenomenal.

Hon. Members will be aware that the Williams-Shapps plan for rail, published in May 2021, set out the path towards a truly passenger-focused railway, underpinned by new contracts that prioritise punctual and reliable services; the rapid delivery of a ticketing revolution, with new flexible and convenient tickets; and long-term proposals to build a modern, greener and accessible network. Central to the Williams-Shapps plan for rail is the establishment of a new rail body, Great British Railways. That will provide a single, familiar brand and strong, unified leadership across the rail network. Great British Railways will be responsible for delivering better value and flexible fares, and the punctual, reliable services that passengers deserve.

The competition for the national headquarters was launched by the Secretary of State on 5 February 2022, and closed for applications on 16 March. The GBR Transition Team is now evaluating the 42 submissions we have received from towns and cities across Great Britain, against a set of six criteria. It is important to understand those criteria: alignment to levelling-up objectives, connected and easy to get to, opportunities for GBR, railway heritage and links to the network, value for money, and public support.

The GBR Transition Team will recommend a shortlist of the most suitable locations, which will go forward to a consultative public vote, and then Ministers will make a final decision on the location of the headquarters, based on all the information gathered.

Peter Gibson: On the issue of the public vote, some locations that are bidding have a significant population and some locations, such as mine and such as Crewe, represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), have a considerably smaller population. Could the Minister outline for the House today what steps will be taken to ensure that proportionality is taken into account in weighing up those votes, so that small towns such as Darlington, which is bidding as where it all began, and Crewe, which is bidding as well, are taken into account and not swamped by those big places?

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. As I set out, in this competition, it is open to towns and cities to apply, and we have seen applications come forward from both towns and cities, as we have been hearing today and throughout the relevant debates. The important thing to remember is that there will be the consultative public vote but that is only one of a number of factors that we, as Ministers, will take into account. We will base our final decision on all the information that we receive. But I take on board the point that my hon. Friend has just made.

As I mentioned, I have been so pleased by the number of bids that we have received and by the quality of the bids. They have been of a really high quality. I am sure that, whichever location we choose, the future headquarters will go to somewhere that is truly deserving.

To go back to the points about GBR, it is important to recognise that Great British Railways will bring ownership of the infrastructure, fares, timetables and planning of the network all together under one roof. It will bring today's very fragmented railways under a single point of operational accountability, ensuring that the focus is on delivering for passengers and freight customers. Great British Railways will be a new organisation with a commercial mindset and a strong customer focus. It will have a different culture from the current infrastructure owner, Network Rail, and very different incentives from the beginning.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) made the point about numbers, and what I can say is that the national headquarters will be of a modest size and we are not anticipating significant Network Rail relocations as a result of it, because the existing rail workforce will still have an important role to play. The new HQ will be based outside London. It will bring the railway closer to the people and communities that it serves, ensuring that skilled jobs and economic benefits are focused beyond the capital. That is very much in line with the Government's commitment to levelling up.

I want to touch on a point about regional devolution. I have mentioned that alongside a new national headquarters, GBR will have regional divisions that are responsible and accountable for the railway in local areas, ensuring that decisions about the railway are brought closer to the passengers and communities that it serves. GBR regional divisions will be organised in line with the regions established in Network Rail's "Putting passengers first" programme, which reflects how passengers and freight move across the network today. Cities and regions in England will have greater influence over local ticketing, services and stations through new partnerships between the regional divisions and local and regional government. Initial conversations are starting with local stakeholders on how those partnerships can best work together.

I would normally turn now to the various points and questions raised by hon. Members, but I sensed that there was a lot of consensus across the Chamber today, with each Member, whichever town they were supporting, making very passionate arguments in support of their town's bid. I recognise that we have had contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter

Gibson) and the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson). I thank them all for those contributions.

To conclude, the reforms proposed under the Williams-Shapps plan for rail will transform the railways for the better, strengthening and securing them for the next generation. The reforms will make the sector more accountable to taxpayers and Government. They will provide a bold new offer to passengers and freight customers of punctual and reliable services, simpler tickets and a modern, green and innovative railway that meets the needs of the nation.

While transformation on this scale cannot happen overnight, the Government and the sector are committed to ensuring that benefits for passengers and freight customers are brought forward as quickly as possible. We have already sold 150,000 of our new national flexi-season tickets, offering commuters savings as they return to the railways. The transition from the emergency recovery measures agreements to new national rail contracts is under way, providing more flexible contracts that incentivise operators to deliver for passengers.

GBR will be an organisation that works alongside the local communities it serves. Integrated local teams within GBR's regional divisions will push forward design and delivery with their partners, supported by new incentives that encourage innovation, partnership and collaboration. It will be designed and have the structure to become yet another example of this Government's historic commitment to levelling up regions across the nation.

Both the Government and the GBR transition team welcome the interests and advocacy from all the respective cities and towns that have put forward bids, and I very much welcome the participation of hon. Members in the competition for GBR's headquarters so that together we can deliver the change that is required. We look forward to building this new vision for Britain's railways in collaboration with the sector and the communities, and the creation of GBR's headquarters is one of many steps we are taking to achieve that.

5.11 pm

Dr Mullan: I begin by thanking the Minister and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), for attending the debate today. If the Minister did not already have an encyclopaedic knowledge of the railway network, she certainly will do by the time this is all over.

I thank again the leaders of the groups of Cheshire East Council, the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership and their staff for the work they have done to produce our bid. I thank Pete Waterman, Cheshire Live, Crewe Nub News and Crewe Alexandra, as well as its supporters' club, the Railwaymen. Again, I thank the 12 MPs who are supporting our bid, in particular the hon. Members for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) for speaking today in support of the bid.

It would be remiss of me not to highlight the key strengths of our bid one last time. Crewe could not be a better connected part of our railway network; it is at the heart of the freight industry and will be at the heart of the next generation of our railway network in the form

[*Dr Mullan*]

of HS2. There is a rich, local, modern railway industry that has grown from our heritage, which means that the key players will only ever be a short walk away—and if they are not, they will definitely be a short train journey away.

Crewe has its challenges, and bringing GBR to Crewe would help us on our journey to improvement in a fantastic way. That journey represents opportunities for GBR, too: it is a place where people can live and work affordably, in an office that would represent value for

money for the taxpayers. I am ambitious for Crewe; the people of Crewe are ambitious for Crewe; and I hope the Minister can be ambitious for Crewe as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Crewe's bid for the headquarters of Great British Railways.

5.13 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 29 March 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Business Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): The Government have condemned the use of threats of dismissal and re-engagement on reduced terms, so-called “fire and rehire”, as a negotiation tactic when employers are seeking to renegotiate contracts.

Last year I asked the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) to look at this issue, and welcomed the publication of their online guidance. In the guidance, ACAS states that an employer should only consider dismissing and offering to rehire someone on new terms as a last resort. Before doing so, an employer must have made all reasonable attempts to reach agreement through a full and thorough consultation. The guidance is available at: Considering employment contract changes: Making changes to employment contracts – employer responsibilities - Acas

The Government will go further. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will bring forward a statutory code of practice on dismissal and re-engagement, under section 203 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992. We will bring this forward as soon as parliamentary time allows.

This statutory code of practice will be admissible in evidence before a court or employment tribunal in England, Scotland and Wales. Where relevant, statutory codes are referred to by employment tribunal judges when deciding the level of award an employee is entitled to. Subject to satisfying the statutory requirements the tribunal can award an uplift in compensation to the employee subject to a maximum of 25% of the overall award. This increases the size of the sanction for companies who abuse the process and do not treat their employees fairly, and should provide a further deterrent effect.

The Government will set out next steps after recess, and will be consulting on the draft code later this year as required by law.

[HCWS735]

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Contingencies Act: 2022 Post-Implementation Review

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): I am pleased to inform the House that a comprehensive report, the “2022 Post Implementation Review of the Civil Contingencies Act” has today been laid before Parliament. This will succeed the 2017 “Report of the Post Implementation Review of the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) (Contingency Planning) Regulations 2005” in fulfilling the Government’s statutory obligation to review the Civil Contingencies Act (CCA)

every five years, as stipulated in regulation 59 of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (Contingency Planning) Regulations 2005.

The CCA sets out a framework for emergency preparedness in the UK, it defines what an emergency is, creates the conditions for effective multi-agency working at the local level and provides emergency powers which allow the Government to react quickly to make temporary special legislation in the most serious of emergencies. Emergency preparedness, supported by the CCA, is essential to protect the UK from hazards and threats that have the potential to cause harm. This post-implementation review (PIR) provides a technical assessment of the legislative framework to ensure that it remains appropriate and sufficient in order to maintain and improve the emergency preparedness landscape. This report will act as a building block for wider work to continue in the coming months and years to make the UK as resilient as possible.

To produce this report, the Government have conducted extensive consultation on the CCA with a range of stakeholders at the local and national level including local resilience forums (LRFs), responder organisations and the devolved Administrations, as well as providing opportunity for public comment on the Act via the resilience strategy call for evidence (summer 2021). Lessons from events since the last PIR were also considered.

The evidence gathered has demonstrated that fundamentally the CCA has served responders well since 2004 and that the principles of subsidiarity, co-operation and co-ordination it sets out remain key. The CCA, as a whole, is fit for purpose. However, the PIR does recommend a number of technical changes to improve the legislative framework under four key themes: role of LRFs and resilience structures; assurance and accountability; categorisation and duties on responder organisations; and part 2—emergency powers and regional nominated co-ordinator. A comprehensive description of these recommendations can be found in the full report.

Following the laying of the PIR, the Government will now turn their attention to how these recommendations may be implemented, beginning first with a process of impact assessments and further stakeholder engagement to ensure that enacting the recommendations will achieve their intended purposes. The Government will also continue to consider which future policy changes may be required to ensure local levels of preparedness meet future needs effectively.

[HCWS733]

Government Efficiency Savings 2020-21

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): As we set out in June 2021’s declaration on Government reform, HM Government are committed to strengthening the cross-Government functions to better support Departments’ delivery capability and maximise value for money for taxpayers.

In the financial year 2020-21, the Government continued their work to deliver savings to the UK taxpayer by improving operational efficiency and effectiveness. Functions, Departments and other central Government

bodies have worked together to realise significant efficiencies in how services and outcomes are delivered. The figures set out here are those which meet the definition of cashable savings. Cashable savings are those which lead to a direct reduction (all other things being equal) in a Department's budget.

During 2020-21, cashable savings totalled £3.4 billion. £1.9 billion of this was delivered through reducing losses from fraud and error, improving debt management and improving the effectiveness of grants. £1.4 billion of the savings were enabled by commercial teams driving improvements in the procurement of goods and services across Government. £142 million of the savings were delivered by digital teams supporting Departments to bring capability in-house and reducing the cost of running IT services. All of these savings have been assured for accuracy and robustness by the Government Internal Audit Agency.

Some improvements to efficiency and effectiveness, such as increases in quality or avoided expenditure, do not deliver cashable savings. As a result, we believe the figure of £3.4 billion understates the total savings and benefits delivered across central Government. Examples of these improvements include the work of functions to deliver expert advice, build professional capability, share good practice, and support continuous improvement. Further illustrations of this work can be found in the efficiency announcement which we have published on gov.uk.

We will provide regular, annual updates on how functional reform and the increasing professionalisation of government is delivering substantial savings and benefits for taxpayers and service users.

Copies of the 2020-21 efficiency announcement and accompanying technical note will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses in Parliament.

[HCWS734]

TREASURY

Financial Services Update

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I can today inform the House of the disposal of approximately £1.2 billion worth of Government-owned NatWest Group plc—formerly Royal Bank of Scotland, RBS—shares, representing approximately 4.91% of the company, by way of a directed buyback transaction.

Approximately £1.2 billion worth of shares were sold to NatWest in a single bilateral transaction on 28 March 2022.

The Government remaining shareholding represents approximately 48.1% of voting rights in the company, meaning that for the first time since the financial crisis NatWest is no longer under majority public ownership.

Rationale

It is Government policy that where a Government asset no longer serves a public policy purpose the Government may choose to sell that asset, subject to being able to achieve value for money. This frees up public resource which can be deployed to achieve other public policy objectives.

The Government are committed to returning NatWest to full private ownership, given that the original policy objective for the intervention in NatWest—to preserve

financial and economic stability at a time of crisis—has long been achieved. The Government only conducts sales of NatWest shares when it represents value for money to do so and market conditions allow. This sale represents a landmark for Government in exiting the assets acquired as a result of the 2007 to 2008 financial crisis, as it takes the Government's shareholding below 50%.

Format and timing

The Government, supported by advice from UK Government Investments, concluded that selling shares to NatWest, in a single bilateral transaction, represented value for money.

Share buybacks are a common practice undertaken by companies looking to efficiently deploy their excess capital. On 6 February 2019, NatWest obtained shareholder authority to purchase shares held by Government at market price. This authority was renewed at subsequent NatWest annual general meetings in April 2019, April 2020 and April 2021.

This is the fifth large block sale of NatWest shares undertaken by the Government, following previous disposals in August 2015, June 2018, March 2021 and May 2021. This is the second sale of shares via an off-market share sale directly to the company.

The sale concluded on 28 March 2022, with NatWest purchasing a limited number of its Government owned shares. A total of approximately 550 million shares, approximately 4.91% of the bank, were sold at the 25 March 2022 closing price of 220.5p per share. The reduction in the Government's shareholding is less than the percentage sold following the cancellation of shares by NatWest. Following this transaction the Government shareholding stands at approximately 48.1%.

Details of the sale are summarised below:

Government stake in NWG pre-sale	<i>c.5,669 million shares</i>
Total shares sold to NWG	<i>c.550 million shares</i>
Share price at market close on 25/03/2022	<i>220.5p</i>
Total proceeds from the sale	<i>c.£1.2 billion</i>
Government stake in NWG post-sale (as % of total voting rights)	<i>c.48.1 %</i>

Fiscal impacts

The net impacts of the sale on a selection of fiscal metrics are summarised as follows:

Metric	Impact
Net sale proceeds	<i>c.£1.2bn</i>
Retention value range	Within the valuation range <i>Nil</i>
Public Sector Net Borrowing	There may be future indirect impacts as a result of the sale. The sale proceeds reduce public sector debt. All else being equal, the sale will reduce future debt interest costs for Government. The reduction in Government's shareholding means it will not receive future dividend income it may otherwise have been entitled to through these shares.
Public Sector Net Debt	<i>c.£1.2bn</i>
Public Sector Net Financial Liabilities	<i>Nil</i>
Public Sector Net Liabilities	<i>Nil</i>

[HCWS732]

DEFENCE

Contingency Liability for Ajax Lessons Learned Review

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): I wish to inform the House that I am today laying a Departmental Minute to advise of a new contingent liability associated with the Ajax Lessons Learned Review.

Clive Sheldon QC has agreed to lead the review. Negotiations are ongoing and the contingent liability will come into force on the formal appointment of the Chair.

The Departmental Minute describes the contingent liability that the MOD will hold, which will provide an indemnity for conducting and reporting the review. The maximum contingent liability held against the MOD is unquantifiable and will remain following publication of the report.

It is usual to allow a period of 14 sitting days prior to accepting a contingent liability, to provide Members of Parliament an opportunity to raise any objections.

Exposure is limited to the contingent liability of any legal action in the run-up to and following the publication of the Review's report. It will not cover claims for liabilities:

Arising from any fraud, wilful misconduct, dishonesty, or gross negligence on the part of a member of the Review Team;

Arising from any wilful breach of any contract or agreement with the Ministry of Defence relating to the Review Team.

It is the view of the Department that the likelihood of any claim is remote.

[HCWS741]

UK Defence Contribution in High North

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): Today I am publishing a new defence policy document for the high north, "The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North." I have placed a copy in the Library of the House. The purpose of this defence high north paper is to ensure that future defence policies, activities and capabilities relevant to the high north region are coherent and effectively integrated with HMG's broader objectives for the region.

The UK's defence contribution in the high north sits as part of the broader UK Government approach to the region defined most recently in the 2018 Arctic policy framework, "Beyond the Ice." While its focus is on the Arctic and high north, it notes that the region is contiguous with the north Atlantic and cannot be isolated from UK interests in adjacent regions, including northern Europe and the Baltic sea region, and the rest of the world. The UK Government will be reviewing its broader approach to the Arctic and will publish a new, integrated Arctic policy framework later in 2022.

"The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North" lays out how defence will support wider UK aims, as outlined in "Beyond the Ice." The main commitments include:

Protecting our critical national infrastructure and our other national interests, and those of our allies and partners.

Ensuring our freedom to navigate and operate across the wider region.

Reinforcing the rules-based international system, particularly UNCLOS.

Contesting malign and destabilising behaviours.

The MOD recognises the growing importance of the high north to our defence and security, the opportunities it presents, and the potential for growing competition and tensions in the region. The MOD is determined to play its part in a Government-wide integrated approach, alongside allies and partners, to ensure that increasing access to the region and its resources is managed safely, sustainably and responsibly. This strategy sets out our commitment. It is intended to guide defence efforts over a 10-year period, including long-term capability decisions, but will be reviewed on a regular basis.

"The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North" can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-03-29/HCWS738/>.

[HCWS738]

Contingent Liability for Ajax Lessons Learned Review

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): I wish to provide a further update to Parliament on the Ajax equipment project being delivered as part of the Armoured Cavalry programme.

Ajax is designed to provide ground mounted reconnaissance, allowing the Army to understand the battlefield in all weathers, 24 hours a day. Part of our £41 billion investment in Army equipment and support over the next 10 years, this modernisation is critical to address future threats.

Health and safety

On 15 December, I announced the publication of the report from the MOD's Director of Health, Safety and Environmental Protection into the health and safety concerns raised by noise and vibration on the Ajax vehicles.

The report made 20 recommendations. Implementation of the recommendations is now under way. Some have already been implemented in full, for example the Army has stood up its noise and vibration working groups (Recommendation 2.2); future trials of armoured vehicles will have real-time measurement of noise and vibration (Recommendations 3 & 11); and we were already taking action to ensure our SROs and project leads stay in post longer (Recommendation 13.1). The remainder are being progressed. We continue to consider the recommendation relating to the overlap of demonstration and manufacture stages (Recommendation 9) to ensure it is implemented in a way that does not hinder our efforts to create a more agile approach to defence acquisition, consistent with the defence and security industrial strategy, and which reflects the industrial processes in different sectors.

Update on personnel

Following the most recent assessment on 17 February 2022, of the 310 people identified as working with Ajax, 13 individuals have had long-term restrictions on noise exposure recommended, potentially requiring a limitation in their military duties. The majority of these

had pre-existing hearing issues prior to working on Ajax; some did not. A further five individuals remain under specialist outpatient care for hearing and other ENT issues. In addition, it remains the case that four individuals who worked on Ajax have been discharged on health grounds, in some cases for reasons wholly unrelated to hearing loss.

It remains the case that no individuals have had long-term restrictions or been discharged as a result of vibration. However, assessments continue for both hand-transmitted and whole-body vibration.

Lessons learned review

The health and safety report highlighted shortcomings that need to be addressed. Although the report only addressed the health and safety aspects of Ajax, it pointed to some cultural and systemic issues that have the potential to go beyond health and safety. That is why the Defence Secretary and I have commissioned an independent follow-on lessons learned review and I am pleased to announce that Clive Sheldon QC has agreed to lead the review. I am sharing copies of the terms of reference with the Public Accounts and Defence Select Committees and placing a copy in the Library of the House.

Programmatic issues

Work continues to resolve the noise and vibration issues. Testing is now under way to verify the effectiveness of modifications proposed by General Dynamics to mitigate the noise and vibration issues to a safe and acceptable level. We will then need to analyse this data in order to understand the practicalities of allowing trials and training to resume.

It remains the case that we cannot yet set a date for the introduction of Ajax into service with the Army. Once a solution to the noise and vibration problems has been identified by GDUK and agreed by the Department, we will need to agree with General Dynamics a realistic schedule to initial operating capability and full operating capability.

In parallel with looking at noise on Ajax vehicles, the MOD has commissioned independent testing of the performance of all headsets used in the full range of in-service armoured fighting vehicles to ensure the specific headsets issued to service personnel offer the best balance between protection and functionality. We are also testing other commercially available headsets for use in our in-service fleet of vehicles. As a precaution, in December 2021, we placed temporary restrictions on the use of headsets across our in-service fleet of armoured vehicles, restrictions we were able to relax later that month as a result of the testing conducted. We continue to be able to fully meet all ongoing, planned and likely operational commitments.

Conclusion

The focus for the MOD and General Dynamics remains on developing and delivering long-term solutions for noise and vibration. We are working closely with General Dynamics and it is showing great commitment to resolving these issues. Until we know what those solutions are, it is not possible to determine a realistic timescale for the introduction of Ajax vehicles into operational service with the Army. We want it to succeed and to deliver what the British Army requires with the utmost urgency.

We have a robust firm price contract for the delivery of 589 vehicles at a cost of £5.5 billion. We will not accept a vehicle that is not fit for purpose.

The terms of reference can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-03-29/HCWS739/>

[HCWS739]

EDUCATION

High Needs Provision Capital Allocations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince): I am today announcing High Needs Provision Capital Allocations (HNPCA) amounting to over £1.4 billion of new investment. This funding is to support local authorities to deliver new places for academic years 2023-24 and 2024-25 and improve existing provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or who require alternative provision (AP).

This funding forms part of the £2.6 billion we are investing between 2022 and 2025, represents a significant, transformational investment in new high needs provision and will support local authorities to deliver new places in mainstream and special schools, as well as other specialist settings. It will also be used to improve the suitability and accessibility of existing buildings.

Combined with the recommendations outlined in the SEND Green Paper released today, this capital investment will support efforts to ensure the high needs system is sustainable into the future.

This funding is on top of the £300 million invested in financial year 2021-22 and our ongoing delivery of new special and AP free schools. There are currently 67 applications approved to open new special and AP free schools.

Full details of this announcement, including allocations broken down by local authority and the methodology used to distribute funding, have been published on the Department for Education section on the gov.uk website here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/high-needs-provision-capital-allocations>.

[HCWS731]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Testing: Future Approach in England

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): On 21 February 2022, the Government published, "Covid-19 Response: Living with Covid-19" which set out the Government's plan for living with covid-19. This included removing remaining legal domestic restrictions while continuing to protect people most at risk of serious illness from covid-19 and maintaining resilience.

The Government's objective in the next phase of the covid-19 response is to enable the country to manage covid-19 like other respiratory illnesses, while minimising mortality and retaining the ability to respond if a new variant emerges with more dangerous properties than the omicron variant. As a result, the Government now assess that it is time to transition their response towards guidance and encouraging responsible behaviours, while targeting protection towards those individuals most at risk from the virus. I have today set out the future approach in England to testing beyond April.

The "Living with Covid-19" strategy is already being implemented. Individuals are no longer legally required to self-isolate, and instead are advised to stay at home and avoid contact with other people if they test positive. This advice will be updated further as set out below. The Government have removed their advice for staff and students in most education and childcare settings to undertake routine twice weekly asymptomatic testing. The Government have started the process of reducing their testing and tracing infrastructure, in preparation for the end of free universal testing from 1 April. We are now reconfiguring our services to target Government testing provision to enable treatment and protect our most vulnerable settings.

Symptomatic Testing

The Government will continue to provide free symptomatic testing for:

Patients in hospital, for whom a test is required for clinical management or to support treatment pathways.

People who are eligible for covid-19 treatments, because they are at higher risk of getting seriously ill from covid-19. People in this group will be contacted directly and sent lateral flow tests to keep at home for use if they have symptoms as well as being told how to reorder tests.

Individuals who live or work in high-risk closed settings, for example in some NHS, social care and prison—and other places of detention—settings where infection needs to be identified quickly to minimise outbreaks.

NHS England will be writing to those eligible people to inform them of the new process.

DHSC will continue to fund some asymptomatic testing in NHS services, during periods of higher prevalence, including for staff and patients.

For ASC services and hospices, DHSC will also continue to fund some regular asymptomatic testing for staff in periods of high prevalence. Asymptomatic testing of care home and hospice residents will be provided on admission and during an outbreak, not routinely.

In addition, in some closed or semi-closed settings, for example: parts of the prison estate, places of detention, and some refuges and shelters, where individuals are at high risk of severe disease outcome and infection can spread rapidly, asymptomatic testing will continue to mitigate risk during higher prevalence periods.

Most visitors to adult social care settings, and visitors in the NHS, prisons or places of detention will no longer be required to take a test.

Contingency

UKHSA will maintain critical surveillance capabilities to provide insight into emerging threats and retain contingency capabilities to enable a rapid response

. This includes genomic sequencing to identify a variant of concern and the ability to scale up a national response, should that be warranted. It will retain the ability to enable a rapid testing response should it be needed, such as because of a new variant of concern. UKHSA will also retain critical lab and contingency infrastructure, delivery channels, mobile testing units, and accompanying digital infrastructure. Altogether, this will ensure we retain critical resilience—giving rapid, reactive capability to respond to a future health threat, while a more comprehensive response can be scaled.

Guidance

Guidance will be published on 1 April that sets out the actions that those with symptoms of covid-19 or respiratory illness should take to reduce risk of infection to others.

Devolved Governments

UKHSA is committed to working with devolved Governments to take forward the testing programme in each nation in 2022-23.

Funding

The Government have provided significant additional funding, through additional borrowing, to respond to the pandemic, the cost of living with covid-19 will be met within existing funding streams, including the additional funding allocated at SR21. The Government will reallocate resources as necessary to pay for the maintenance of our pharmaceutical defences against covid-19 and preserve hard-won freedoms.

Free parking in hospital car parks for NHS staff was temporarily introduced for the duration of the pandemic and will also come to an end on 31 March. However, over 94% of NHS trusts that charge for car parking have implemented free parking for those in greatest need, including NHS staff working overnight.

Conclusion

Finally, on behalf of the Government, I would like to record my thanks to everyone who has worked tirelessly to keep people safe over the last two years and whose efforts have enabled us to move to the next stage of the covid-19 response.

The Government will continue to work together with our partners to keep all these measures under review.

[HCWS740]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration Rule Changes

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary (Priti Patel) is today laying before the House a statement of Changes in Immigration Rules.

The changes reflect our commitments to Ukraine and the main changes are as follows:

We are now formally bringing the Ukraine Family Scheme, launched on 4 March 2022; the Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme launched on 18 March 2022; and a new Ukraine Extension Scheme, which will launch on 3 May 2022 into the Immigration Rules.

These new routes show the UK stands shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine and its citizens. The changes we have made to the visa process are making it quicker and simpler for Ukrainians to come here, as well as ensuring those already here can stay.

A Ukrainian national who is an immediate or extended family member of a person in the UK who is a British citizen, settled in the UK, or who has certain types of limited leave can come to the UK under the Ukraine Family Scheme if they were resident in Ukraine immediately before 1 January 2022. They can also bring their immediate family members to the UK.

A person who meets these requirements who is already in the UK can also apply to stay, so long as they have permission to be in the UK—except as a visitor—or if their permission to stay has recently ended.

Immediate and extended family members include married, civil and durable partners, fiancé(e)s or proposed civil partners, parents—of a person both under and over 18 years old—grandparents, grandchildren, children—both under and over 18 years of age—siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, and in-laws, as well as their immediate family members—partner, parents and children.

A Ukrainian national and their immediate family members can come to the UK under the Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme if they were resident in Ukraine immediately before 1 January 2022 and have an approved sponsor in the UK who has agreed to provide them with accommodation for at least six months.

A Ukrainian national and their partner and children who had permission to stay in the UK on 18 March 2022—or which has expired since 1 January 2022—can stay in the UK under the Ukraine Extension Scheme.

All the routes are free.

Applicants must also meet suitability requirements and under the Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme the sponsor and anyone else living in the accommodation will be subject to security checks.

People applying for entry clearance who have a valid Ukrainian passport are able to start their application overseas, and, if they appear to be eligible, they will be permitted to travel to the UK and granted permission to enter for six months on arrival, and they can complete their application for three years' permission to stay by providing biometrics in the UK.

Successful applicants will be granted permission to stay in the UK with full access to work, study and public funds.

Due to the importance of providing the certainty reflected in these rules, they will come into effect on 30 March 2022 for the Ukraine Family Scheme and the Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme; and 3 May 2022 for the Ukraine Extension Scheme.

[HCWS10]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Social Housing Reform

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): Everyone in this country deserves to live in a safe and decent home. It is unacceptable in a country like the UK that

anyone should have thick black mould covering their walls and have to worry about their children breathing in spores; to be put at risk of slipping on a permanently wet floor; or to have water dripping through their ceiling on to electrical appliances, putting their safety at risk. Yet too many people in social housing do live in circumstances such as these. And too often, social housing residents have simply not been listened to or felt respected by their landlords when they have tried to raise complaints, or simply talk to their landlord about these issues.

The package of reforms I am announcing today helps address these issues and is just one of a number of reforms that the Government have delivered since the Grenfell Tower fire, including the Building Safety Bill and the Fire Safety Act, to help social housing tenants live in safe and decent homes. We have made progress. In 2010, 20% of social homes were classified as non-decent. In 2019, 13% of social homes were classified as non-decent. However, we must go further.

That is why the Government will bring forward legislation when parliamentary time allows which will ensure robust regulation of social housing landlords, a policy that has long been championed by bereaved families and survivors of the Grenfell tragedy. We published “The Charter for Social Housing Residents: Social Housing White Paper” after talking to thousands of residents across the country about their experiences. This set out a wide range of measures designed to drive up standards and fix a broken complaints system including by beefing up regulation of the sector, strengthening the Housing Ombudsman Service, and empowering residents to know and exercise their rights. We know we need to go even further than this to make sure that we are delivering for residents up and down the country, which is why one of our 12 missions set out in the Government’s “Levelling Up” White Paper is to halve the number of non-decent rented homes by 2030.

Today I am announcing a package of measures which represent important steps forward. These measures are:

- Social housing regulation legislation
- A Resident Panel
- Naming and Shaming
- Tenant factsheet

Social Housing Regulation Legislation

Social housing tenants deserve to be better informed by their landlords, treated with courtesy and respect and to have their problems quickly resolved. Unfortunately, this has not always been the experience of residents in social housing.

The upcoming legislation will enable a new, proactive approach to the regulation of social housing landlords on consumer issues such as safety, transparency and tenant engagement, with new enforcement powers to tackle failing landlords. It will support a strong new regulatory regime which will drive a significant change in landlord behaviour, ensuring landlords focus on the needs of their tenants and are held to account for their performance.

The upcoming legislation has three core objectives:

- To introduce a new, proactive consumer regulation regime so providers of social housing can be effectively held to account for the services they provide to tenants.
- To refine the existing economic regulatory regime to make sure social housing providers are well governed and financially viable, to protect homes and investment in new supply.

To strengthen the enforcement powers of the Regulator for Social Housing (“the Regulator”), enabling it to take robust action where landlords are in breach of the standards.

Further information on the sample draft clauses which have been published today can be found here.

The Resident Panel

It is vital that the voices of tenants who live in social housing are heard directly by the Government. That’s why we are announcing the formation of a Resident Panel. The panel will consist of 250 social housing tenants, who will discuss the measures the Government are taking to ensure social landlords provide their residents with a high-quality service and invite residents to help us improve them.

The panel will meet once every four months for the foreseeable future, with residents having the opportunity to inform policy thinking, through sharing their experiences and suggesting ways that the Government can continue to influence landlords to drive change.

Naming and Shaming

While there are many providers of social housing who provide high-quality accommodation and services to tenants, there are too many who fail to meet the standards expected of them. The Government will take a stronger stance on naming and shaming social housing landlords who fail to meet the standards expected of them, by:

- publicising on social media where landlords have breached the Regulator’s consumer standards or where the Housing Ombudsman has made its most serious findings of severe maladministration against them;

- engaging directly with these landlords where they have not self-referred to the Regulator. If a landlord finds they have breached a regulatory standard, they should let the Regulator know; those who fail to do so will be contacted by Ministers.

Tenant factsheet

We know that too often tenants do not know who to turn to get help when they need it most.

That’s why we are publishing—and promoting—a factsheet to explain the role of the Housing Ombudsman Service and the Regulator. The factsheet reinforces the clear message in our communications campaign “Make Things Right”, which is encouraging residents to use their landlord’s complaints process and where necessary the Housing Ombudsman Service if they’re unhappy with the service from their social housing provider.

Both these organisations seek to improve the service delivered by social housing landlords, but there can be confusion about the respective roles of the two organisations, and where residents should go for support if needed.

The factsheet will outline the support on offer to residents, how landlords are held to account, and the changes that we are making to improve the services provided by the Housing Ombudsman Service and the Regulator of Social Housing.

[HCWS737]

TRANSPORT

Accessible Transport: Reference Wheelchair Report

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): The Government are committed to ensuring disabled passengers have the same access to transport as everyone else, with assistance if physical infrastructure remains a barrier. We want disabled people to be able to travel confidently, easily and without extra cost.

Today, the Government are taking an important step to help fulfil their commitment in the inclusive transport strategy to review its use of the Reference Wheelchair standard.

The ISO Reference Wheelchair standard is the reference point for a range of vehicle and infrastructure designs used across the transport sector and referred to directly and indirectly in accessibility standards for public transport vehicles and infrastructure.

In 2021, the Government commissioned an assessment of the prevalence, dimensions and uses of wheeled mobility-aids in the United Kingdom in relation to the use of the Reference Wheelchair standard on land-based transport modes.

The findings of this assessment estimate that the current Reference Wheelchair standard accommodates 60% of wheelchairs, and 54% of wheeled mobility-aids. However, this does not necessarily mean that the current standards are inadequate, and there will be trade-offs between making transport more inclusive for all passengers by setting more stringent standards that accommodate larger wheelchairs, and the practicalities for transport operators to accommodate larger and more diverse mobility-aids within conventionally sized public transport vehicles.

However, these findings will be used to help form the broader evidence base to determine the design of future vehicles and transport infrastructure to meet mobility-aid users’ needs. In particular, we intend to use these findings to inform the forthcoming review of the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations 2000, which we expect to conclude by the end of 2023.

[HCWS730]

Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 29 March 2022

HOME DEPARTMENT

Daniel Morgan Independent Panel Report

The following is an extract from the statement on the Daniel Morgan Independent Panel Report on 23 March 2022.

Kit Malthouse: 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. *[Official Report, 23 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 381.]*

Letter of correction from the Minister for Crime and Policing, the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse):

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck).

The information should have been:

Kit Malthouse: 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 **16,000**, astonishingly.

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Ukraine

The following is an extract from the statement on Ukraine on 28 March 2022.

Elizabeth Truss: President Zelensky and the Ukrainian people know that everybody in the United Kingdom stands firm with them. **We were the first European country to recognise Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union. Thirty years on,** we are the first to strengthen its defences against Putin's invasion, and lead the way in our support.

[Official Report, 28 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 593.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs:

An error has been identified in my statement.

The correct information should have been:

Elizabeth Truss: President Zelensky and the Ukrainian people know that everybody in the United Kingdom stands firm with them. **We were** the first to strengthen **Ukraine's** defences against Putin's invasion, and lead the way in our support.

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**not later than
Tuesday 5 April 2022**

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