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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 31 March 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Cyber Resilience

1. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on improving the UK's cyber resilience. [906409]

12. **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to strengthen domestic cyber resilience against potential impacts from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [906428]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): Our new national Government cyber security strategy sets out our approach to making the UK more resilient to cyber attacks and countering cyber threats. We have undertaken significant outreach within the Government and critical national infrastructure, including with the UK devolved Administrations, to provide mitigating advice to bolster UK preparedness.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am grateful for that answer. We know that Russian-sourced cyber attacks rose by 800% in the 48 hours immediately after Putin's renewed attack on Ukraine. As his ground war falters, we can expect cyber warfare to be ramped up even more. I understand that EU countries are establishing a cyber security fund to protect civil society and the private sector against Russian attacks, so what steps are the Government taking to help civil society and the private sector to protect themselves?

Steve Barclay: We have set out a range of measures as part of our whole of Government, whole of society approach. That was the essence of the cyber strategy that we launched before Christmas. It includes working with local authorities, which have been particular victims, and takes on board the lessons from, for example, the attack on the Irish health system. It includes looking at regulation and helping with procurement so that products fit for cyber risk are bought. It has a particular focus on skills, with areas such as the north-west having a cyber corridor where we have, as part of our levelling-up work, a real focus on getting the cyber skills we need across all parts of the UK.

Lee Anderson: Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been a wake-up call for everyone in this country. We are under threat of cyber attack every single day. What lessons have the Government learned from the invasion to prevent cyber attacks on our schools, education, transport system and all the things that we rely on every day?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Before the Russian invasion, the rationale for the national cyber strategy that we launched in December was to make the UK more resilient. As we have just discussed, that requires a whole of society approach, but it also requires specific action within Government, which is why I launched the further Government cyber strategy, working closely with the National Cyber Security Centre, which is a world leader in its field.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister Rachel Hopkins.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that he is serious about eradicating Russian influence from our country, yet his Government have sat on their hands for two years, with the majority of recommendations of the Russia report still yet to be implemented. On cyber security, the Russia report exposed the complete lack of accountability within and across Government Departments when it comes to cyber matters. New legislation has only made lines of responsibility more confusing. We are vulnerable. The National Cyber Security Centre has managed an unprecedented 777 cyber incidents over the last 12 months, up from 723 the previous year, with 40% aimed at the public sector. Either the Government are not taking the Russian cyber threat seriously, or the Minister does not have control of his own Department. Which is it?

Steve Barclay: There is consensus across the House on the need for a whole of society approach on cyber. On the charge that the Government have sat on their hands, the fact that we launched the cyber strategy before the Russia-Ukraine conflict broke out shows that that is not correct. Looking at the spending review, there is a significant uplift in funding for the National Cyber Force, which I visited in the north-west. Councils such as Preston, which you will be familiar with, Mr Speaker, are heavily engaged in terms of the skills agenda for the NCF. A huge amount of work has been done on that.

In terms of the wider Opposition charge that the Government are sitting on their hands, one need only look at what President Zelensky has said about the Prime Minister's response, the military support, the sanctions support, the bilateral aid—where the UK has been a leader—and the work to ramp up our response on refugees. If the Opposition are unhappy with what President Zelensky has said, then look at what the Russian Government have said about the way in which the Prime Minister has been at the front of the pack in ensuring a united western response.

Covid-19 Contracts

2. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the need to ensure value for money in the award of covid-19 contracts. [906411]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Her Majesty's Government's priority throughout the pandemic has been to protect the lives and livelihoods of citizens across the United Kingdom. We have been clear from the outset that all contracts, including those designed to tackle coronavirus issues, must continue to achieve value for money for taxpayers and use good commercial judgment, and that the details of any awards made should be published in line with Government transparency guidelines.

Neale Hanvey: According to the National Audit Office investigation into the management of PPE contracts, billions of pounds of taxpayers' money is still at risk. Between March 2020 and October 2021, it cost £737 million to store excess PPE, and costs are currently £7 million per month. Over half the VIP suppliers provided PPE that the Department of Health and Social Care considers unsuitable for frontline services; in addition, some 1.5 billion items of PPE are currently in storage and expected to expire before they can be distributed. What is being done to understand the governance issues around this and the cost of that waste? How will that be reported to the House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government were facing an emergency. PPE was needed immediately. It was obviously right to order more than was necessary—that was fundamental. At the beginning of the pandemic, nobody knew precisely how much would be needed, but we knew we needed supplies. The Government succeeded in getting domestic production, excluding gloves, up from 1% to 70%.¹

The hon. Gentleman refers to 50% of suppliers having something faulty: all that means is that in a shipment that may have been of tonnes of PPE, one item was faulty. It does not mean that 50% of the items received were faulty. That is a fundamental error that people have been making in deliberately misunderstanding what the National Audit Office has said. Our duty was to get PPE in quickly. That was done properly, professionally and to the benefit of the nation.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister Rachel Hopkins.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Minister talks about value for money, yet we know that the Government handed hundreds of millions of pounds of our money to an offshore company involving a Tory peer, created just days before and without any transparency, that sold Government PPE at three times the price it had bought it for. It is now in mediation because the PPE was not even fit for use. Millions of items are now stuck in storage, costing us even more.

The Government refuse even now to reveal what they know about the company in question, and our letters to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster go unanswered. Perhaps the Minister will answer this: when will we finally get the promised procurement Bill? What safeguards will be in it to stop yet more public money from being wasted and to end the so-called emergency bypassing of procurement regulations?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is a classic socialist point of view—that we should not have done anything to get PPE in urgently and, to go to the hon. Lady's earlier question, that we should have just sat comfortably upon our hands and allowed PPE not to be provided around

the country. The Government got on with doing the job that was necessary, and of course they ensure value for money. Let anyone who has overcharged us be in no doubt: we are after them.

DWP Office Closures

3. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the planned closure of her Department's offices. [906413]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): The Department for Work and Pensions locations plan is in line with the wider Government Places for Growth programme. That programme aims to deliver a more geographically diverse civil and public service that will better serve the public. The recent announcements will support the DWP's delivery of a strategy that will, over the next 10 years, reshape how, where and when it delivers services. These closures are not part of a plan to reduce headcount.

Jeff Smith: The moving of 411 jobs from Chorlton in my constituency will have a serious impact on the district centre and the shops and services that they help sustain; undoubtedly, the same will apply to the other 40 offices in towns and suburbs across the country. How do those office closures contribute to the Government's stated aim of spreading civil service jobs around the country and, indeed, to levelling up?

Mrs Wheeler: People are being asked to move either three miles or eight miles away. They are having one-to-one bespoke meetings asking them how they would like to carry on working. As I say, all 411 jobs will be staying in the civil service because such important back-office jobs are needed. People are being asked to find where the best place is for them to work. If they want to carry on working in other civil service jobs in the area, they can transfer.

Mr Speaker: We now come once again to shadow Minister Rachel Hopkins.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I am on a roll, Mr Speaker. The last time I asked whether the Government are planning to sack hard-working civil servants, as the Minister for Government Efficiency has proposed, he sidestepped the question. Now we know why. The Government have since announced the closure of 41 DWP offices across the country, in the middle of an economic crisis and when their services are needed more than ever. All of the offices being closed entirely are outside London, and the vast majority are in the very areas that have been promised more investment. So much for levelling up.

Will the Minister now tell us just how many jobs are at risk? Will she guarantee that there will be no compulsory redundancies, and will she explain how this fits into the Government's plan to reform the civil service?

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Lady asks a number of questions. Regarding the question asked by the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), the landlord wants the property back and wants to redevelop the area, which will bring other jobs to the area. However, the

1. [Official Report, 26 April 2022, Vol. 712, c. 7MC.]

most important thing is, on these very important back-office jobs for these 411 people, that they are not looking at any reduction in headcount.

**Contaminated Blood Products: Sir Robert Francis
Report on Compensation for Those Affected**

4. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): When the Government plan to publish the report by Sir Robert Francis on compensation for those affected by contaminated blood products. [906414]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Sir Robert Francis delivered his report to me on 14 March, and I will carefully consider his findings and recommendations. It is my intention to publish the compensation framework study alongside the Government's response as soon as possible, and in sufficient time for the infected blood inquiry and its core participants to consider them before Sir Robert gives evidence to the inquiry.

Dr Whitford: In the five years since the UK Government finally agreed to hold a public inquiry, 90 victims of the contaminated blood disaster have died in Scotland alone, 27 of them just in the last year since Sir Robert Francis was asked to consider compensation mechanisms. The inquiry team and victim groups need sufficient time to look at his report, so does the Minister not recognise how disrespectful it is to the victims of this disaster to delay publishing the report and then announce the Government's response and decision without hearing their views?

Michael Ellis: It is extremely important that all those who have suffered so terribly can get the answers that they have spent decades waiting for. The hon. Lady knows that it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) who initiated this inquiry after 30 years of successive Governments not doing so, and it is Her Majesty's Government who commissioned, proactively, the study that we are talking about this morning. What I have said is that I will consider the matter very carefully, and all due and appropriate considerations are being given to all of the factors that the hon. Lady has mentioned and to other factors, too. We will do that in sufficient time for the inquiry and its core participants to consider them before Sir Robert gives evidence.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend accept that there is another NHS treatment disaster in the making, in that there may be 10,000 or more people who have suffered serious injury or even death as a result of adverse reactions to the covid-19 vaccinations? Will he give an assurance that those people will get justice immediately rather than have to wait for decades?

Mr Speaker: Order. That is a very weak link. Sir Christopher is usually better than that. I think that is a poor effort from him. Let us move on to Kate Osamor.

Covid-19 Pandemic: Public Inquiry

5. Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): For what reason the public inquiry into the covid-19 pandemic will not hold public evidence hearings until 2023.

[906415]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): The timing of the statutory inquiry's various stages is, under the Inquiries Act 2005, a matter for its independent chair to determine.

Kate Osamor: Many bereaved families and campaigners are anxious to hear the truth about the Government's handling of the pandemic in a public inquiry. Meanwhile, the Government have admitted that none of the Prime Minister's mobile phone messages up until April 2021 will be accessible to the inquiry, because he got a new phone. In the light of that, will the Minister confirm a date when the public hearings will be formally established?

Michael Ellis: What the Government are doing is following the statutory provisions of the Inquiries Act 2005, which, as the hon. Lady will recall, was passed by a Labour Government. The Act says that it is up to the inquiry chair, in this case Baroness Heather Hallett. She is a leading figure and is dealing with the matter, and it will be for her to determine dates.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I spoke to some of the bereaved families at the memorial march this week, and they are furious and devastated that the public hearings of the covid inquiry will not be starting in the spring, as promised; instead, it looks as though it will be spring next year. This inquiry cannot be compromised any further, so have the Government learned the lessons from the deletion of the WhatsApp messages, which would no doubt have been crucial evidence in this inquiry, and will they ensure that any pandemic-related messages from Ministers and former Ministers in WhatsApp or private email accounts are passed over and safely stored to prevent further unfortunate losses of evidence?

Michael Ellis: I do not accept the contention that there has been any loss of evidence. Baroness Hallett has confirmed that her investigation will begin once the terms of reference are finalised. It is logical that evidence has to be gathered before it can be heard, and she has said that she intends to gather evidence throughout this year, with public hearings beginning in 2023. She has made it clear that she will do everything in her power to deliver recommendations as soon as possible. We all want that.

British Industries

6. James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote British industries around the world. [906416]

9. Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote British industries around the world. [906419]

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): The GREAT campaign, for which the Cabinet Office has responsibility, showcases to the world all four corners of our nation and our thriving industries. Working with other Departments and arm's length bodies, the GREAT campaign partners with the private sector to promote our industries internationally and encourage trade and investment with the UK. As of last year, GREAT had an average return-on-investment ratio, since its launch in 2011, of more than 15:1 to the UK economy.

James Sunderland: Bracknell lies at the heart of the silicon valley of the Thames valley, and we are very proud of our overseas businesses and British firms. Can the Minister confirm what we are doing to make sure that the sanctions against Russia do not negatively impact British businesses?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for businesses in Bracknell, and he makes a very good point. I reassure him and businesses all over the UK that the overall impact on the UK economy of sanctions will be limited. Some firms will be more exposed than others to Russian trade and financial market measures, but we have put in place mitigations to manage the impact on UK businesses and workers. We are also putting in place the appropriate licences to allow certain businesses to keep running and pay staff.

Stephen Hammond: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. He will know that many UK companies believe it is difficult to access that help from UK non-governmental organisations. Can he reassure me that he is doing what he can to ensure that embassies, consulates and those bodies are getting the proper resources and are prioritised to help UK businesses win in global markets?

Nigel Adams: That is absolutely the case, and I know from my previous role at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office that our missions around the world are home to some of our best salespeople. They are absolutely on message when it comes to promoting UK businesses and making sure that we are doing our best to stand up for businesses all around the world. They do a fantastic job, and we have plenty of programmes under way to ensure that that continues to be the case.

Small Business Bids for Government Contracts

7. **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for small businesses to bid for Government contracts. [906417]

10. **Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for small businesses to bid for Government contracts. [906420]

15. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for small businesses to bid for Government contracts. [906431]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): We are increasing opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises by transparently publishing contract pipelines and simplifying bidding processes. These measures are working, and the latest central Government procurement figures for 2019-20 show that £15.5 billion was paid to small and medium-sized businesses to help to deliver essential services for UK taxpayers.

Andrew Lewer: Under policy procurement note 06/21, the new carbon reduction plan requirements are obligatory for any Government procurement of more than £5 million. That is especially onerous for SMEs, including those in

my constituency of Northampton South. How will Ministers try to make this more proportionate for SMEs, which have much less ability to afford such costly bureaucracy?

Steve Barclay: I am sure that the ears of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency will have pricked up at the suggestion of any regulation that is onerous and that he will want to look at that in detail. It is worth reminding the House that the £5 million figure applies per annum and that advice is available—only one plan is required and there are private sector organisations that provide advice and support, some of which is free. However, my hon. Friend raises an important point and I am sure my right hon. Friend will want to look at that to reassure himself and the House that it is proportionate to need.

Neil Parish: Both the report from the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in April last year and the national food strategy, which came out last July, made recommendations to the Government on transforming public sector food procurement. While we still await the Government's response to the food strategy, we will need shorter, more local supply chains, so that we can get great-quality, sustainable British food into the public sector. The south-west stands ready to be used as a pilot to test out a dynamic procurement system, but plans are stalling after funding from the Crown Commercial Service for the South West Food Hub was withdrawn. What can my right hon. Friend do to speed up the roll-out of the dynamic procurement model? Will he look again at supporting the South West Food Hub as a pilot, because it is doing great work?

Steve Barclay: I am extremely keen to work with my hon. Friend on this issue. He raises an important point and I am happy to meet him as a matter of urgency to take this forward. It is worth reminding the House that there was not specific funding for this; the memorandum of understanding with the South West Food Hub did not include specific funding. The CCS had been using its existing headcount and funding to establish a commercial solution for food, but the wider point he raises is a very valid one and I am extremely keen to explore it with him.

Bob Blackman: Small businesses experience frustration in getting on to the list of both local government and national Government contracts, so I welcome the light-touch approach that my right hon. Friend is taking. Will he assure me that taxpayers will also benefit from the transparency, so that everyone can see what contracts are being made, how much they are for and what the benefit is in the long term?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an extremely valid and important point: simpler and more transparent processes, ones that are more accessible to the innovation of our small and medium-sized enterprises community, in turn drive far better value for money. As constituency MPs, we all see that, across the House, with our SMEs. This is very much at the heart of what the Minister for the Cabinet Office and colleagues are driving through with the procurement legislation that is planned, and it is exactly the point that we want to take forward.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Many moons ago, after the global financial crash, Tameside Council developed an initiative called “Tameside Works First”, which was a way of circumnavigating the then *Official Journal of the European Union* rules on public procurement and meant that the council could award far more contracts to local companies, massively benefiting those local companies. We do not have OJEU rules any more, so I would like to offer Tameside Works First to the Minister. Let us have a Britain Works First initiative and encourage local government and central Government to do more to award contracts to British companies.

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman raises a legitimate point. We have all seen in our communities that local businesses often have a pride in the service they give because it is within their locale and they know the local school, business or hospital involved. Their own workforce have an interaction with it, so it is not just about the quality of the service, but the pride in what they are delivering. That is not always reflected in simple tender prices that are bid. It is very much at the heart of the procurement legislation that we look at social value, for example how many disabled employees a bidding company has. We need to consider that wider social value, looking at issues such as food miles and quality, not simply at the money that is bid. This is also part of having a more transparent, accessible and simple process that enables SMEs such as the ones to which he alludes to take part in those contracts.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In my Strangford constituency and across Northern Ireland, we have large numbers of small and medium-sized businesses, with excellent people and entrepreneurs with talent and ability. What can be done to enable such businesses in Northern Ireland to obtain Government contracts and reinforce the fact that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is always better together?

Steve Barclay: I absolutely concur that we are better together as the United Kingdom. The ability shown in the pandemic to act across the United Kingdom, including through the firepower of Her Majesty’s Treasury in respect of schemes such as furlough, has amply demonstrated that.

On the hon. Gentleman’s more specific point, one material thing that can be done is on the visibility of the pipeline of available contracts. There is around £250 billion-worth of public procurement and around £50 billion-worth of central Government public procurement, and I am extremely keen that SMEs in Northern Ireland are able to get visibility of that pipeline, so that we can tap into the talent and entrepreneurial spirit of which the hon. Gentleman speaks.

Innovation, Growth and Regulatory Reform

8. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What progress his Department has made on reducing red tape since the UK’s departure from the EU. [906418]

14. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What progress he has made on implementing the recommendations of the Taskforce on Innovation, Growth and Regulatory Reform report published on 16 June 2021. [906430]

16. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote growth and innovation following the UK’s departure from the EU. [906432]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): We will bring forward a Brexit freedoms Bill to end the special status of retained EU law. It will accompany a major drive to reform, repeal and replace retained EU law, thereby cutting at least £1 billion-worth of red tape for UK businesses. The Government’s “The Benefits of Brexit” paper reinforced Departments’ commitments in response to TIGRR, and Departments are pushing ahead in delivering the recommendations in its report.

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Stephens. Not here.

Theresa Villiers: Will the Government make progress on the TIGRR recommendation to replace the EU clinical trials directive with a new modern framework to ensure that people can access life-saving treatments quickly and that our world-leading medical research sector can thrive?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my right hon. Friend for her terrific work on the TIGRR report to provide so many ideas for the Government. I assure her that I am working closely with the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who was also involved in the TIGRR report and now has ministerial responsibility in many of the medical-related areas. The consultation on the proposals to reform UK legislation on clinical trials to protect the interests of participants while providing a more streamlined and flexible regime to make it easier and faster to run trials closed on 14 March 2022. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency is analysing the more than 2,000 responses that were received and preparing the Government response. There is great urgency behind this work.

Peter Aldous: Coastal areas have their own unique set of challenges and opportunities. I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend outlined the Government’s cross-departmental strategy to promote growth and innovation in areas such as Waveney. In particular, will he set out the Government’s proposed replacement for assisted area status, from which Lowestoft benefited?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is a particular champion for coastal communities—especially for Waveney—and has been since we entered Parliament together in 2010. East Suffolk Council is working with local businesses and the community on its £24.9 million town deal for Lowestoft. We are no longer bound by burdensome EU state aid rules, so assisted area status will be replaced by new a subsidy control regime. The Subsidy Control Bill, which was introduced to Parliament in June 2021, provides the framework for the new UK-wide regime. It is back under our control and, under the Subsidy Control Bill, we will have a new system. Through the new regime, public authorities throughout the United Kingdom will be able to award bespoke subsidies that are tailored to local needs.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Minister just claimed that the Government are cutting £1 billion-worth of red tape as a result of Brexit, but the Commons

Public Accounts Committee, which has a majority of Conservative MPs, says that Brexit red tape is costing businesses £5 billion per year. Does the Minister accept that finding?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman is joining thousands of readers of the *Sun* and of the *Sunday Express* in pointing out ways in which we can cut red tape further. There is more joy in heaven over the one sinner who repenteth than over the 99 who remain pure.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The *Financial Times* has reported that the checks on food imports that were due to be introduced in July will be delayed yet again. In the middle of a Tory cost of living crisis and a period of food insecurity, that may have short-term benefits, but, as the British Veterinary Association has highlighted, it is not sustainable, and it serves only to highlight the absurd claim that Brexit would reduce red tape. What possible Brexit opportunity can the Minister identify from delaying these checks yet again, because of the extreme harm they would have caused, and what long-term solutions are the Government exploring?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The SNP once again wants to be ruled by the European Union. This is the most extraordinary claim from a party that wants to be independent. It wants to be independent for one minute, and then it says to our friends in Brussels, "You take over because we are not able to do it for ourselves; we are too weak, feeble and frail to be able to stand on our own two feet, so we've got to get somebody else to do it." The great advantage of being out is that it is up to us. We have the single trade window coming forward, which will be world-beating, and potentially one of the best systems anywhere, cutting out bureaucracy not just for people with whom we are trading in the European Union, but globally, because we in the Conservative party have a global horizon, rather than this narrow Brussels-based horizon of the Scottish nationalists.

Brendan O'Hara: I will attempt to pick the bones out of that one when I read *Hansard*. Hearing of Brexit opportunities reminds me of that classic comedy, "Abbott and Costello in the Foreign Legion" when Bud and Lou get lost in the desert and come across an ice cream parlour that everybody knows to be a mirage except them, and that is exactly what this is—a mirage. Many of our performers are now having to rely on the charity, Help Musicians, for a £5,000 grant so that they can afford to take their performances to Europe. Why do our performers now require charitable help, and what happened to that promised post-Brexit bonfire of red tape?

Mr Rees-Mogg: In 1661—[*Interruption.*] I am not with Abbott and Costello; there is a much better Carry On where they are in the desert and Kenneth Williams is leading them in the Foreign Legion. Let us go back to 1661. In 1661, outside in Old Palace Yard, the public executioner took all the Acts that were passed by the illegitimate Cromwellian Parliament and burned them. I have to say that I would like to do something similar to what was done between 1972 and our departing from the European Union. We are building up the kindling wood thanks to the readers of *The Sun* who are sending in their brilliant suggestions.

Memorial for Victims of Transatlantic Slave Trade and Slavery

11. Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of erecting a memorial for victims of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. [906422]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): There is no disputing the horrors of what occurred during the slave trade, which is why we commemorate the annual International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition on 23 August.

Wera Hobhouse: A number of my constituents are part of the Memorial 2007 project, which is a campaign to set up a memorial for the millions of Africans enslaved in the transatlantic trade. The right hon. Gentleman's predecessor promised that he would meet me and the campaigners, but then the schedule did not allow that to happen. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster now commit to meet me and the campaigners of the project?

Steve Barclay: One reason why the UK Government were engaged with the UN memorial in New York was to ensure that the suffering and trauma inflicted as a result of the slave trade do not happen again, so we contributed to the memorial there. Even as a constituency MP, I think of Thomas Clarkson. There are already memorials of the leading figures in the campaign against slavery, including of Thomas Clarkson who should be remembered alongside Wilberforce. I will ensure that somebody from the Cabinet Office meets the hon. Lady to discuss anything further that we can do.

Cyber Security Strategy

13. Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reduce cyber crime through the Government Cyber Security Strategy. [906429]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): The Government's cyber security strategy will strengthen the public sector's cyber resilience, making it harder for malicious actors, including cyber criminals, to disrupt Government functions. Building organisational cyber resilience and introducing measures to enable Government to defend as one will ensure that the Government present an increasingly hard target.

Mr Baker: Will my right hon. Friend please consider a report by the Royal United Services Institute entitled, "The Silent Threat", which calls for fraud to be made a national security priority, so that the full machinery of the state can be brought to bear on criminals often based overseas?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point, and it is one that Cabinet colleagues are looking at, not only in the context of covid fraud and issues such as bounce back loans, but, as he rightly says, in light of the RUSI report and its recommendations. We are discussing with the Home Office and industry stakeholders how we can best commit to ensuring that all possible action is taken to address the risks from fraud that he identifies.

Mr Speaker: We now come to topicals, where I suggest there are a lot of free hits, as we have quite a little bit of time.

Topical Questions

T1. [906399] **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): This month we appointed Baroness Gisela Stuart, who is well known to the House, as the new civil service commissioner to oversee the body guaranteeing that civil servants are selected on merit, on the basis of fair and open competition. Baroness Stuart brings a wealth of experience, having been a Member of this House for 20 years and a Government Minister for the Labour party, and brings a non-partisan spirit to roles including her time at the University of Birmingham, the Royal Mint and as a non-executive director of the Cabinet Office. We have also been working on taking forward the Prime Minister's work on Brexit opportunities; my right hon. Friend the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency has identified almost 2,000 EU regulations remaining in British laws, which he is reviewing in order to reduce the burdens on business and the public. I have also written to Departments across Whitehall to ensure that we make the necessary regulatory changes to ease the burden of the cost of living, and will have further meetings with colleagues to take that work forward.

James Sunderland: Events in Ukraine prove that the international rules-based order continues to be threatened by aggression and competition. What is being done to increase and improve the UK's strategic independence and self-sufficiency for its needs?

Steve Barclay: That is an extremely important point in terms of both our energy security and our wider commitments building on COP26 and net zero. That is why the Prime Minister, the Trade Secretary and I hosted a number of Australian investors, who collectively have committed £25 billion of inward investment in green technology to the UK, at No. 10 Downing Street last night. That is both an indication of our commitment to energy security and to ensuring that we learn the lessons of Russia and Ukraine, and a signal of the attractiveness of the UK for foreign investment, which reflects this Government's commitment to supporting business and levelling up across the UK.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Contrary to the Prime Minister's own promises last year, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has quietly shelved any attempt to limit MPs' second jobs. He claims it is impractical. Since I was elected two years ago, I have received more than 1,500 emails a month, sent nearly 40,000 emails back to my constituents, spoken in this Chamber more than 380 times and tabled more than 500 questions. For me, what would be impractical is having a second job in the first place. However, more than a quarter of Conservative Members have second jobs, and I do not think many are NHS workers. That brings them an extra £4.4 million a year in extra earnings—so, colleagues, the post-Adjournment party drinks are on the Conservatives. I will ask a question being asked across the country: is it impractical finally to stop the second jobs bonanza, or is it simply inconvenient?

Steve Barclay: It is slightly odd simply to say it is the Government side of the House. There are hon. Members on both sides of the House who have had second jobs, including with the NHS and in a range of public services; but equally, working with business is important as is ensuring that the House is aware of how we generate the prosperity to level up across the community and building on that £25 billion investment that we were discussing a moment ago. Perhaps she can enlighten the House on whether writing a book is a valid use of someone's time, or indeed chairing a panel on "Have I Got News For You", as one of her colleagues did recently, and on the distinction between that and working in areas that contribute tax and contribute to the country at large?

Fleur Anderson: The Chancellor has asked businesses to think very carefully about any investments that would in any sense support Putin and his regime. However, this is pretty hypocritical given that he and his family are still making millions from Infosys, a company still trading out of Moscow. We need to be united in our opposition to Putin. It cannot be one rule for us and another for the Tory elite.

Mr Speaker: Order. We cannot use the word "hypocritical".

Fleur Anderson: I am so sorry.

Mr Speaker: Just withdraw it and that would be great.

Fleur Anderson: Thank you, Mr Speaker; I withdraw it.

But I would like to ask if there will be an investigation, or there has been an investigation, into whether the ministerial code has been broken in this instance and what action will be taken given the Chancellor's failure to declare his family's huge shareholdings in this company.

Steve Barclay: I am not going to engage with sweeping comments that do not address the record of this Government, which is very clear in respect of Russia and Ukraine. This Government have led in their actions on sanctions, in their investment in bilateral aid, and in their response to military support in-country. That is reflected in the response both of the Ukrainian Government and of the Russian Government. In respect of the ministerial code, Lord Geidt addresses those issues in the usual way.

T2. [906400] **Shaun Bailey** (West Bromwich West) (Con): Local government procurement is an important part of ensuring that we get vital services to the most vulnerable in our communities. My right hon. Friend will be aware of the disgraceful procurement practices at Labour-led Sandwell Council, which has seen contracts handed to mates, dodgy land deals, and finally commissioners bashing down the doors to deal with these problems. Can he assure the House that as part of his reforms to local government procurement, he will prioritise value for money, and, more importantly for my constituents in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton, prove to them that the actions of Sandwell Council are not the norm?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. It would be great to hear voices from the Labour Benches showing their commitment to tackling these issues. I can reassure him as to the Government's support on the issue that he raises, and he is right to bring it to the attention of the House.

T8. [906407] **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): This week I joined grieving families like mine to mark the anniversary of the covid memorial wall. On the same day, we watched in shock as the Met police issued 20 fines for the Downing Street parties. Right now, the chair of the UK inquiry is meeting the bereaved families on the terms of reference of the inquiry, and soon the chair will pass draft terms to the Prime Minister. Given the importance of this inquiry, will the Minister confirm that the draft terms will be published in full to guarantee that the chair's recommendations are implemented?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point. It is a deeply emotive point for the families affected. That is why we are committed to getting the terms of reference right. That is why, as my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office set out, this is shaped by the judge Lord Hallett and comes under the terms of the legislation passed by a previous Labour Administration. I know that Lord Hallett is committed to working with stakeholder bodies as regards reflecting the terms of reference in a way that meets the wider need.

T3. [906401] **Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that as the House moves after the Easter recess to legislate through the online safety Bill, there must be effective co-ordination on disinformation between the counter-disinformation unit and the RESIST programme at the Cabinet Office, as well as Ofcom, as the online safety regulator, to make sure that social media companies take proactive action against known threats to this country, including the online frauds and scams mentioned earlier?

Steve Barclay: That is an extremely important point. Both the Minister for the Cabinet Office and I have chaired a number of Cabinet Sub-Committees looking at our wider domestic resilience and our response in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. It builds on the national cyber strategy launched before Christmas and the Government cyber strategy launched after Christmas. It is about working with relevant stakeholders to have a whole of society approach, whether that is in relation to the excellent communication from the Ministry of Defence in recent weeks in de-classifying key documentation around some of the Russian misinformation campaigns, or looking at the wider piece: getting in the right skills, the right training and the right product regulation so that we have that whole of society resilient approach, building on work through the situations centre and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Radisson RED, a hotel in my constituency, was promised full compensation by the UK Government for business disruption during COP26, but it has not received the full compensation it believes it was entitled to. It has

been passed from pillar to post by the COP26 President, the right hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), who committed in this House to meet me, but never did, and by the Cabinet Office, which has been ignoring its emails. Can the Minister tell me how many other businesses in Glasgow have been similarly treated by the Cabinet Office? Will he meet me on this, because it has taken the shine off events that Glasgow was very proud to host?

Steve Barclay: I know that the COP26 President will have a strong commitment to addressing any issues. Rightly, Members across the House have recognised that the event in Glasgow was a great demonstration of the UK working together. It was an illustration of how we are better together. If there are some specific issues that Members of the House are rightly highlighting from a constituency perspective, I will ensure those are brought to the attention of the COP26 President and ask whether he will meet her as a matter of priority.

T4. [906402] **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): The news that there will be legislation to ensure that we maximise the benefits of Brexit is incredibly welcome. Will my right hon. Friend comment on how that legislation will enable and set free those companies in the thriving tech sector across my constituency of Buckingham to innovate in a more free manner than when we were in the EU?

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important question. The Brexit freedoms Bill will modernise the UK's approach to making regulations by enabling Her Majesty's Government effectively to amend, repeal or replace any retained EU law. These reforms will help cut business costs by removing EU red tape and creating a UK-centric regulatory framework that encourages competition, innovation and growth. The Bill will also help accelerate the excellent work of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) to deliver the recommendations from the taskforce for innovation, growth and regulatory reform in the fields of technology and life sciences.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Earlier, the Minister for Brexit Opportunities decried an Act of Parliament from 1972. There was a further Act of Parliament that year that also changed the face of England and Wales: the Local Government Act 1972. Much of that made sense for the delivery of public services, but the lords lieutenant have no role in local government. They are Her Majesty's representatives in a county, and as a patron of the Friends of Real Lancashire, I can say that much damage was done to historic Lancashire. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster look at restoring the lords lieutenant to cover the historic counties for ceremonial purposes, so that the Duke of Lancaster's representative can cover all the Duke of Lancaster's county palatine, from the Mersey to the Furness fells, and from the Irish sea to the Pennines?

Steve Barclay: I fear it is not just me who has to declare an interest in this—Mr Speaker himself may have to declare an interest. Any question that starts with reinforcing the county of Lancashire is extremely

welcome. Before the hon. Gentleman's siren call draws me on to the rocks of constitutional propriety, I would want to take advice as to what the interaction is with the Palace and other quarters that may have a view on this. I take this moment—I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree—to pay tribute to the incredible work that the lords lieutenant do up and down the country. They are at the heart of so much civic activity within our constituencies and make a hugely valuable contribution through their work.

T5. [906403] David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Will the Veterans Minister join me in thanking the Department for Work and Pensions and other Government services that help veterans find work when they leave the armed forces? Will he consider visiting some of those services and the many veterans support charities in a visit to my constituency? Finally, will he also join me in thanking those veterans in Banff and Buchan and across the country who have been donating clothing and other supplies to those fighting for their lives in Ukraine?

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): Veterans make brilliant employees, which is why employment is at the heart of our veterans strategy. It is also why we have introduced national insurance contribution holidays for those who employ veterans and a guaranteed job interview for veterans who want to join the civil service. Of course, I join my hon. Friend in thanking the veterans in his constituency who have so generously contributed to our collective effort on behalf of Ukraine. I also thank him for the work he does in concert with his veteran community in Banff and Buchan. If time allows, I would be delighted to visit his very beautiful constituency.

Mr Speaker: The House of Commons has signed the covenant, and the House of Commons Service is open to veterans.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Every one of the 65 million or so people in these four nations who has a mobile phone, tablet, iPad or Alexa-enabled device is a potential target for hostile nations seeking to damage our cyber-security, but the National Cyber Force budget amounts to 10p a month for each of those citizens. What representations has the Minister made to the Chancellor to raise that budget to a more reasonable level?

Steve Barclay: I have some exposure to this, having been Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Of all the budgets, the agencies' budgets have increased more than most, if not the most. Significant funding has been put into the National Cyber Force as part of the cyber corridor in the north-west. There are sometimes limits to how much detail one gives on some of those budgets, but I am happy to interact with the Intelligence and Security Committee to provide any reassurance the House needs that significant funding is being provided on our resilience and our national cyber-response. That builds on a number of points raised this morning, including our work on the skills needed as part of that resilience and the situation centre in which we have invested.

T6. [906404] Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): We have exited the EU and regained control, but I fear we have lost a lot in trade and unity in these isles. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should explore new avenues of trade, and perhaps reinvigorate lost avenues of trade, such as through the Commonwealth?

Steve Barclay: I concur with my hon. Friend that the Commonwealth is of huge importance. He is right to highlight that, but it fits within the wider strategy of the integrated review as part of global Britain, including building on defence ties such as with the Australian and US Governments through AUKUS. This brings significant defence opportunities, as well as opportunities for Treasury policy such as freeports and for our wider work through the Department for International Trade on free trade agreements. This is all part of global Britain, of which the Commonwealth is a key stakeholder.

Mr Speaker: I call James Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My mother calls me James or Jim, so you can choose, Mr Speaker.

I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for all his answers. On the recent fears of Russian cyber-attack, what contact and security support is there for our banking sector? What financial help or assistance can be offered to keep our institutions free from Russian cyber attack?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members have rightly highlighted the importance of our cyber resilience in general and at this time. There is a host of excellent advice in the whole of Government approach set out in our national cyber strategy launched before Christmas. I specifically draw the House's attention to the advice from the National Cyber Security Centre, which hon. Members can reinforce through their weekly columns and interaction with businesses in their constituency. The NCSC is a great repository of advice on how to take action on cyber resilience.

T7. [906406] Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): In the light of the benefits of their pension schemes to public sector workers of all ages, can my right hon. Friend offer support for the idea of expanding pension auto-enrolment to workers of all ages in the private sector so that they can begin building a pension in the same way as their counterparts in the public sector?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Our ambition remains to enable people to save more and to start saving earlier by taking forward the core recommendations of the Department for Work and Pensions 2017 review of automatic enrolment, which the Government committed to implement in the mid-2020s subject to engagement with stakeholders and finding ways to make the changes affordable.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Notwithstanding the earlier exchange, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will want to acknowledge my gratitude and satisfaction at the excellent job that he is making of his second job as a Minister of the Crown, will he not?

Steve Barclay: I simply pay tribute to my right hon. Friend. For a question of that sort, I think brevity is the best response in acknowledging the point that he raises.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I thought I would take advantage of an extra question. With our trade deals with Australia and New Zealand, which are to be welcomed, we will need to make a great drive to send food and drink across the world. Can we have more enthusiasm from the Government to drive our exports, especially food and drink?

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): It is crucial that we do exactly what the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee says. The Cabinet Office works closely with DEFRA on our great campaign to promote food around the world and we do that through our trade commissioners and the great teams that we have in post. One example is that we worked closely with DEFRA to promote Scottish seafood in China, which contributed an immediate £1.5 million in export wins.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): May I ask the Minister for Brexit Opportunities whether he believes that we can maximise our opportunities as long as article 16 of the Northern Ireland protocol remains in place?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend for his brilliant and inspired question. There are obviously difficulties with the Northern Ireland protocol, which was set out in the agreement to be amendable, changeable and alterable, and that must be done. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is working on that and it is important to get it right, because nothing must undermine the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as a single entity. That is the Government's policy, that is the Government's aim and that is what will happen.

Mr Speaker: That is the end of Cabinet Office questions. We now come to the urgent questions, as no statements were forthcoming.

Rape as a Weapon of War in Ukraine

10.32 am

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con) (*Urgent question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if she will make a statement on Ukraine with particular reference to the use of rape as a weapon of war.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): On 24 February, Russia launched a premeditated and wholly unprovoked invasion into Ukraine. Since then, we have been horrified by reports of rape and sexual violence committed by Russian armed forces in Ukraine. We have been clear that Russia's barbaric acts must be investigated and those responsible held to account. Let us be clear: indiscriminate attacks against innocent civilians amount to war crimes for which the Putin regime must be held accountable.

That is why the Government worked with partners to refer the situation in Ukraine to the International Criminal Court, to establish a commission of inquiry through the UN Human Rights Council with the support of Ukraine, and to establish an Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe mission of experts. We brought allies together to expedite an ICC investigation into the situation in Ukraine through state party referral. With 37 countries joining the UK, it was the largest referral in the ICC's history. The international community is isolating Putin on the world stage.

It is vital that the ICC is able to carry out that investigation, which is why the UK will provide military, policing and financial support to help to uncover evidence of such crimes and ultimately seek justice. On 24 March, we announced an additional £1 million of funding for the ICC to help to uncover evidence of war crimes and we are providing UK experts to support the investigation.

Sadly, rape in war is not new. Before the war started in Ukraine, the Foreign Secretary committed the UK to do more to tackle sexual violence in conflict, including, but not limited to, its use as a method of warfare. We are working with countries and international partners to strengthen the international response. All options are on the table, including a new international convention that would help to hold perpetrators to account.

The UK continues to act decisively with its allies to punish the Putin regime for its unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, and we will do all we can to bring the perpetrators of war crimes, including sexual violence, to justice.

Anthony Mangnall: It is a tragic reality that, in conflicts and crises around the world, rape and sexual violence have become weapons of war. They are the tools of the vicious and the violent, and the consequences have such long and far-reaching impacts on the individuals, their families and their communities. It is happening in Tigray, in Myanmar, in Iraq, and now it is happening in Ukraine. Since the start of the conflict in Ukraine, there have been widespread reports of Russian troops resorting to rape and sexual violence against women and girls.

Just two weeks ago, this House and the Prime Minister welcomed four Ukrainian Members of Parliament to Westminster and to No. 10. They highlighted the fact that Putin

"has changed his strategy to target the most vulnerable groups of women and children".

They went on to report that women were being raped and executed, and those who were not executed were killing themselves.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative as well as the Conservative Friends of International Development. The UK's action and leadership on this subject matters and has proven to be world leading. However, we must have more steps taken now in relation to Ukraine.

Yesterday, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) raised this issue in the Liaison Committee. She asked the Prime Minister whether we had deployed our PSVI team to support survivors and victims of sexual violence into Ukraine or the surrounding areas. The Prime Minister said that we had. Can the Minister please confirm that, and provide details to the House of how many we have supplied to the area and whether we will provide more?

It is particularly welcome to see the appointment of Sir Howard Morrison QC as the independent adviser to the Ukrainian prosecutor. Can the Minister confirm that all crimes of sexual violence will be documented and prosecuted, and where this will take place?

Many of us who support the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative have been calling for a new independent international body to investigate sexual violence in conflict wherever it takes place, as a body that will support survivors, document crimes and, working with local courts, prosecute perpetrators. Does the Minister accept that that is needed now—not in six months, not in 12 months, but now—with our global leadership and our determination?

Finally, the PSVI and gender-based violence need a long-term strategy, with full and transparent funding formulas. Ukraine is unfortunately, as I have said, on a long list of countries where rape and gender-based violence is perpetrated without fear of justice. We must end the culture of impunity, and the Government must act now on behalf of the people of Ukraine.

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for this question, and for pointing out the incredible importance of our work on preventing sexual violence in conflict. Indeed, the UK is a world leader on this issue. The UK has committed over £50 million since the launch of the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative in 2012. We have funded more than 85 projects in 29 countries to respond to conflict-related sexual violence. We have trained 17,000 police and military personnel, and deployed UK experts over 90 times since 2012. That has helped to build the capacity of the UN and non-governmental organisations in countries such as Ethiopia, Mali, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe and Uganda.

It is incredibly important that women—it can be men as well as women—who have suffered sexual violence are supported. As hon. Members know, we have put considerable funding into the humanitarian situation in both Ukraine and neighbouring countries. We are supporting internal efforts to investigate violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in Ukraine, including the ICC investigation, as I have said. On 4 March, the Metropolitan police operationalised its war crimes division. That is helping to collect evidence

[Vicky Ford]

from those who have come to the UK, which will support the ICC. Our energy and assistance resources are targeted on supporting the work of the ICC on war crimes, rather than trying to build a new tribunal, because that could take many years, but other countries are doing things similar to the Met police's operations.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for this hugely important urgent question and you, Mr Speaker, for granting it. As ever, Labour Members stand absolutely with the people of Ukraine, including all the women and girls of Ukraine who are suffering horrendously in this conflict started by Putin. This war of aggression has had a terrible toll on civilians across the country.

We know that, throughout history, rape and sexual violence have been used by aggressors to punish, terrorise and destroy populations, from the rape of women during the 1937 Nanking occupation to the estimated 200,000 women subjected to rape during the fight for independence in Bangladesh. We have also seen victims of sexual violence in Bosnia and, more recently, as I have raised with the Minister, in Tigray and Myanmar. It is because of those heinous examples, and countless others, that rape and sexual violence have had to be explicitly prohibited under international humanitarian law and the Geneva conventions. As war ravages Europe once again, the grim reality is that we hear horrific reports of rape and sexual violence being used as weapons of war once more.

This week, one Ukrainian woman told *The Times* that she was raped on multiple occasions by Russian soldiers in her family home after they murdered her husband and while her four-year-old son was in tears nearby. That is utterly horrific and heinous. As the hon. Member said, we have also heard direct testimonies in the House. We were told:

"We have reports of women gang-raped. These women are usually the ones who are unable to get out. We are talking about senior citizens. Most of these women have either been executed after the crime of rape or they have taken their own lives."

Every part of the House will condemn those appalling crimes, but condemnation is not enough. We need accountability and justice must be done. Putin and his cronies, and all those breaking international laws of war in his name, must face the full force of the law for the crimes and atrocities that they are, no doubt, committing.

The Minister made a number of important points, but will she set out clearly the steps that the Government are taking, crucially to gain the evidence to document these incidents? She mentioned the role of the Metropolitan police and other initiatives. What are we learning from past examples, particularly in the Balkans and elsewhere, about what we can do to ensure that evidence is collected and collated so that people can be brought to justice? How are we working with human rights organisations and others? What is her assessment of access for such organisations? Will she back Labour's call for a special tribunal so that all war crimes, including the crime of aggression, can be prosecuted? Will she explain the detail of how humanitarian aid is being used in particular to support women in crossing the borders?

We have heard concerning reports about cuts to health and conflict in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which are crucial areas that affect the situation for women and girls. Will she assure us that they will not take place? Labour will always support what it takes to protect victims of sexual violence in Britain and Ukraine and across the world.

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Member for his support for women and girls. I, too, read the truly harrowing story of Natalya in the papers. It was so brave of her to come forward and tell the world that story. Indeed, the women who come forward to give their testimonies about the sexual violence that they have faced in conflict are incredibly brave. Recently, women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo came forward to give testimony that led to a conviction at the international court of a senior military leader for war crimes, including sexual violence. That was a true moment to show that we can—and will—hold these people to account.

The Government are supporting the ICC investigation. As I said, the UK was a leader in getting that set up and we have given it £1 million of funding to allow efforts to get started. Indeed, Karim Khan, who is the leader of the investigation and is from the UK, recently visited Ukraine. We are working with humanitarian organisations. In fact, just this week I met the head of the Charity Commission to discuss safeguarding issues and to remind UK charities on the ground about the risk of safeguarding concerns, including trafficking, child trafficking and so on. We will support the efforts of the ICC rather than trying to build an entirely new tribunal from scratch. That process could take many years, so we believe that it is best to ensure that it works through the ICC, which is why we are funding it.

We have not deployed to Ukraine at the moment, but we stand ready to do so if that becomes appropriate.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I commend the Minister and the Foreign Secretaries over the past decade on their international leadership on this important issue. Should Vlad Putin the invader decide to travel overseas to the G20 later this year, will she confirm that he will be arrested on the spot as a war criminal?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend asks, "Is Putin a war criminal?" There is very strong evidence that war crimes have been committed by the Russian armed forces in Ukraine. It will be for the ICC prosecutor to identify the individuals who may have committed those crimes. That is why we are supporting the work of the ICC prosecutor in every way that we can.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Alyn Smith.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing this urgent question on a very difficult but very important subject. It is vital that we take due note of what is going on in Ukraine. We can all agree that rape as a weapon of war is beyond despicable. I will focus my remarks on urging the Government to take action on only three points, because much has been said that I agree with.

SNP Members have called for a specific atrocity prevention strategy. Work is under way across the FCDO on these issues, but we think that bringing that into a coherent atrocity prevention strategy would be helpful in not only holding the Government to account on what is being done, but urging more action on that.

On accountability, I agree with the Government's approach of supporting the ICC, rather than creating new structures. That is proportionate and the best way to do it. I was glad to hear about the funding, but as we have seen from Syria, we can have all the evidence that we like, but if there is not the political will to carry it through, we will not see the necessary accountability on the ground and the fear of justice to end the culture of impunity that we are hearing reports of from Ukraine. I urge the Government to do more on that and to publish as one document the efforts that are being made to help accountability mechanisms in Ukraine, because that would again help the coherence and strategy to be clear to us all.

I echo the points about people trafficking and safeguarding, on which I know the Minister has been very active. However, perhaps we can have a specific statement on the risk of trafficking of vulnerable refugees and what the UK and other partners have done to help and assist. I am aware that the German police have been doing very useful work on that, but, sadly, a lot more work needs to be done.

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his care and concern on this really dreadful issue. His last point was about the risk of people trafficking and other safeguarding issues and that is precisely why I met the head of the Charity Commission this week. We want to ensure that we are getting the alert out to charities on the ground about the risk of infiltration by people who they would not want in their organisations—let me put it like that. It is a very serious risk. That is one of the reasons we encourage the British people, if they want to contribute, to do so through the Disasters Emergency Committee.

How do we try to change the dial on this issue? The hon. Gentleman is right that more needs to be done. That is precisely why, at the end of last year, the Foreign Secretary said that we need to look at a new international agreement or convention on dealing with sexual violence in conflict. There is no single treaty that is dedicated to conflict-related sexual violence, and we believe that consolidating all the legal obligations could help to prevent that and to ensure that SV is seen as an early warning sign. We think that having a new international agreement or convention would have a symbolic and practical value, because it could help to increase the prevention of conflict-related sexual violence, strengthen states' commitment to supporting survivors and, importantly, improve the mechanisms to hold perpetrators to account. It will take time. We are not going for quick political wins; we are working with experts internally and internationally towards a new UN General Assembly resolution to set up a convention on the process.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The Minister will know that there are three components of fighting power: physical, conceptual and moral. Does she agree that any violations of the Geneva convention in Ukraine are likely to galvanise the Ukrainian forces to become an even more formidable adversary, and galvanise the

ICC, the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other agencies to generate the necessary evidence for future prosecutions?

Vicky Ford: I completely agree with my hon. and gallant Friend. Furthermore, he used exactly the right word to describe the Ukrainian people: formidable. I would add brave, caring and just absolutely unbelievable. I do not think that there is a single person in this House who does not have huge admiration for what Ukraine is doing to support its own people.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Lesia Vasylenko, an incredibly brave Ukrainian MP and mother of three, spoke recently of women being raped and hanged, some in front of their very young children. Putin has changed his strategy to target the most vulnerable groups in this illegal and unethical war. It is always women and girls who pay the highest price. They are being targeted and raped and having their own bodies used against them as we speak. What will the Minister do differently now to prevent more unimaginable suffering for women and girls and ensure the safe passage of humanitarian aid into the country?

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Member for her deep concern for women in war. It is the most vulnerable who suffer the most, and that is very often women. We have also heard reports of forcibly removing citizens from the country, which would be a violation of international human rights law.

We have led the efforts to launch the ICC investigation, the commission of inquiry and the OSCE investigation. The Deputy Prime Minister has chaired a meeting of 38 Governments in The Hague to ensure that international efforts, including on evidence collection, are co-ordinated. As I said, the Metropolitan police have operationalised their war crimes team to ensure that it can collect evidence from the brave women who would like to give it, so that we can hold the perpetrators to account. It is so important to show that we can hold people to account, because that is the way that we can try to prevent this hideous crime from continuing.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): I thank the Minister and especially the Foreign Secretary, who I know has made the matter a priority. However, given the woeful levels of prosecution, there is clearly an issue with the collection and recording of evidence in the existing system. That is why Lord Hague of Richmond, the former Foreign Secretary, has called for an international, permanent long-term body to collect and record crimes around the world. Can the Minister tell us whether she has at least had any conversations with her counterparts about establishing that permanent body?

Vicky Ford: We are working through the ICC, because we believe that that is the best way to take people to court for war crimes. Setting up a new body could take many years. We have seen from the experience in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that the ICC can be effective in holding people to account, but it is incredibly important that the evidence is gathered, which is why we are funding it now and supporting other organisations. However, we believe that a new convention or a new international agreement is needed. That is one of our key priorities for this year; it was a key priority for this year even before this hideous war started. The tragedy is

[Vicky Ford]

that in wars across the world these awful crimes happen, which include the terrible situation for the women of Tigray.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on bringing this deeply emotional question to the House. The use of rape as a weapon of war is reprehensible, it is repugnant, and it has no place anywhere in the world.

The Minister was right in saying that we are starting, through sanctions, to isolate Putin and his cronies, but I find it deeply disturbing that although we have imposed some sanctions, there are still gaping holes, especially in respect of golden visas. A question from my noble Friend Baron Jones of Cheltenham revealed that we had given golden visas to eight people. That is an embarrassment. It is disgusting in itself, and it prompts us to ask how many more people used Putin's blood money to buy their way into this country. Will the Minister have a word with the Home Office, and the Home Secretary in particular, to speed along the review of golden visas so we can ensure that none of this money has been used—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we are shortly to have another urgent question on visas. This urgent question is about rape and the use of women in war. The hon. Lady might be getting the two mixed up, and it would be more appropriate for her to raise that issue following the next urgent question. However, I invite the Minister to try to deal with the question that she has asked.

Vicky Ford: We are implementing the strongest set of economic sanctions ever imposed to debilitate the Russian economy and degrade funding for Putin's war machine, because this war has to stop, and the rape and violence against women has to stop.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): There is absolutely no doubt that the rape of women in Ukraine is one of the burning issues. However, the Minister made a helpful reference to the successful prosecution of a senior military commander in the Democratic Republic of Congo. What can we do to ensure that those in the command structure of the Russian forces are aware that they themselves become liable to prosecution if they fail to prevent rape from being committed by troops serving under their command? That would be a powerful message to send.

Vicky Ford: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. I also think that this Chamber is sometimes a very powerful place from which to send messages, so let me send this message again. Rape and sexual violence in war can be a war crime. It is always a crime, but it can be a war crime, and we are working with the international community to ensure that those who commit war crimes are held to account.

The hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) mentioned the MP Lesia Vasylenko, who was so brave in telling the world the stories of some of the women. It is Lesia's birthday today. She is 35. Can we all take a

moment to send her our best wishes, and our deepest thanks for what she is doing for women at this time? [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Accountability and ensuring justice and consequences are hugely important, and I do not want to detract from that, but they are not helping survivors on the ground right now. Could the Minister give us a bit more clarity on what her Department is doing to help those who either are in Ukraine or have fled Ukraine, and who are survivors of sexual violence in conflict? What support are they being given on the ground, and if such support is not currently being provided, how does the Minister intend to ramp things up so that it is provided now?

Vicky Ford: The tragedy is that, as the hon. Member will know, getting support into Ukraine itself can be particularly challenging at this time, especially in the most affected areas, but we have provided a very significant amount of support through humanitarian aid. Many of those who are working in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries are extremely experienced in this field.

As I said earlier, I met representatives of the Charity Commission this week to discuss safeguarding issues and to ensure that charities are thoroughly aware of them. As I also said earlier, the Metropolitan police have operationalised their war crimes division in order to be able to collect evidence from those who have come here, and I know that many other countries are doing the same.

All refugees will need support, which is why we are providing that humanitarian aid—and God bless the British people, too, for being so generous—but we understand that those who have suffered from sexual and other violence will need additional support.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister has talked about another consequence of war being human trafficking, particularly for sexual exploitation. Can she say a bit more about what we are doing as a country to aid international investigations into human trafficking? Secondly, will she speak to her colleagues in the Home Office about the role of the National Crime Agency, particularly in relation to Ukrainian women who might be advertised for rape on pimps' websites that are on a lot of social media platforms?

Vicky Ford: These are really important issues, and I completely agree with the right hon. Lady about how important it is to highlight them, especially the issue of safeguarding. That is why I had a discussion about safeguarding with the Charity Commission earlier this week. Significant work is also happening through Interpol to look at the situation on the ground. It is important to remind people that they are at risk of sexual exploitation and of modern-day slavery, which can involve sex workers. As I said earlier, we are aware of reports of civilians being forcibly removed, which is another violation of international humanitarian law. That is why we continue to support efforts to investigate the violation of human rights and international humanitarian law.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I recently tabled a named day question asking about the requirement for refugees from Ukraine to obtain visas to enter the

UK, and the assessment of the level of risk to women and children from human traffickers in that context. The response to that question is now nine days overdue. I know that this is an incredibly difficult situation, but it is even more difficult to properly safeguard women and girls if we have not identified and assessed the risks. Is the Minister able to commit to that being taken forward as part of the work she has set out today?

Vicky Ford: On the issue of visas, there is about to be an urgent question on that subject. It is important to have proper processes for visas and for those who have offered homes to Ukrainian refugees precisely because of those safeguarding concerns.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Violence against women and girls is unacceptable in any circumstances. The use of rape as a weapon of war is abhorrent, and those who perpetrate it must be brought to justice for the sake of the victims. Some of those women will reach these shores safely, and we have a duty not just to protect and look after them but to assist them in coming to terms with the absolutely awful experiences they have had. What extra resources are the Government putting into mental health services for those people who have fled Ukraine?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that conflict-related sexual violence is truly hideous. In 2020, a report from the UN Secretary-General found conflict-related sexual violence in 18 different countries. I will need to come back to the hon. Gentleman on the specific question on mental health support, but I point him to the fact that on 4 March, the Metropolitan police operationalised its war crimes division. That is significant because one important way to help women is to let them know how they can come and tell their stories in order to be able to hold people to account. From the accounts that I have heard from women, knowing that they are doing their bit to prevent this from happening to others in the future can itself be part of the mental healing process.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I also thank the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for asking it and giving the House the opportunity to expose and denounce rape as a weapon of war. It must not be normalised and, as the Minister has said, perpetrators must be brought to justice. Will the Minister confirm whether there have been discussions about the UK introducing atrocity prevention strategies to FCDO country offices to give early warning and training and to stop atrocities such as sexual violence in this and other conflicts?

Vicky Ford: As the hon. Member knows, because she came to meet me, a huge amount of work goes on with our conflict prevention strategy not only in Ukraine but around the world. Right now, we are focusing on supporting the people of Ukraine. It is incredibly important that Putin stops this war and stops the violence. Our priority at the moment is to help to reduce the impact of that conflict on those people. The hon. Member is right to say that we work across the world to try to reduce conflict. Indeed, I was in Nigeria recently, which is one of the most challenging countries from the point of view of attacks on civilians, even though it is not what

we would describe as a warzone. The work we are doing there to try to reduce conflict is absolutely part of our approach, and it has to be done in the right way for a particular place.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Earlier this week I met Amnesty International, which is working on the ground in Ukraine and has growing concerns about the use of sexual violence against women and girls. Will the Minister assure the House that when the evidence is collected and people are called to account, this hideous and despicable crime is not simply lumped together with other crimes but is seen as a stand-alone offence and will be punished as such to the full extent of the law? That would send a clear signal that it is not acceptable and that the perpetrators will be hunted down, called to account and punished for what they have done.

Vicky Ford: May I use this opportunity to thank Amnesty International, including the branch in my constituency of Chelmsford, which does a fantastic amount of work to raise concerns about human rights issues right across the world? The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that sexual violence in war is completely unacceptable. That is why, as I have said, the Foreign Secretary has made it a priority to work internationally on a new agreement or convention in order to strengthen the global response, to increase prevention of conflict-related sexual violence, to strengthen the state's commitment to survivors and, most importantly, to improve our mechanisms to hold these dreadful perpetrators to account.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Given their proximity to Ukraine, some of the poorest countries in Europe are already looking after huge numbers of refugees, many of whom will have been victims of rape and sexual violence or will have been traumatised by what they have witnessed. These countries do not have the resources to provide the specialist support that these refugees need urgently. Has the Minister considered making an offer to countries such as Moldova to send specialist support from the United Kingdom to work with women there while we cannot get anyone into Ukraine? Has she asked the Chancellor for, at the very least, a temporary increase in funding so that the support given to the victims of sexual violence in Ukraine does not come at the expense of resources for other work around the world to protect the lives and rights of women and girls in other areas of conflict?

Vicky Ford: I assure the hon. Member that the UK is one of the largest donors not only of humanitarian aid—we have recently pledged £220 million—but of humanitarian teams. An emergency medical team has been deployed to neighbouring countries, including Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Moldova, which he mentioned.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her obvious appreciation of the issue and understanding of how to address it. May I also say, with absolute honesty, that her response to the urgent question shook me to my core? It highlighted once again the depravity and evil of men. Rape has been considered a war crime for many years, but it is not enough merely to cite evidence of it. Russian war crimes are multiple, targeting schools and hospitals, and killing babies, women and

[Jim Shannon]

the elderly and disabled. Will the Minister lead the charge? Evidence is already being collated—I think Ukrainian MPs already have evidence. Will she stop at nothing to make sure that those responsible are held to account and that punishment for those who carry out these awful crimes will be certain?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Member is absolutely right that it is vital that we hold people to account. That is why it is essential that the ICC can carry out its investigation, and it is why the UK will provide military, policing and financial support to help uncover evidence of such crimes. Ultimately, it is crucial that we seek justice, because only through justice will we be able to prevent such crimes from happening.

ROYAL ASSENT

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

Education (Careers Guidance in Schools) Act 2022

Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Act 2022

Nuclear Energy (Financing) Act 2022

National Insurance Contributions (Increase of Thresholds) Act 2022.

Ukraine Refugee Visas

11.11 am

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on visas for Ukrainian refugees.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): The conflict in Ukraine continues to shock the world. Putin's invasion is deplorable and he must fail. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people at this time. We are determined to help Ukrainians to find safety in the face of Russia's aggression, and that is why the Government have mounted a comprehensive humanitarian response. In a short time, we have set up two new visa schemes from scratch, made changes to support Ukrainians already in the UK and surged our operations to meet demand.

Under the Ukraine family scheme, more than 23,500 visas have been issued to family members of Ukrainians already here in the UK. After setting up the scheme, we extended it to cover wider family members. Alongside that, we have set up the Homes for Ukraine scheme, to provide a safe and legal route for Ukrainians who do not have existing family ties in the UK. That is led by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) is the Minister who will be updating the House on it shortly. It has been heartwarming to see so many members of the public coming forward as sponsors, and my hon. Friend will be able to outline wider work that is being done to take advantage of those offers. Both those schemes are free and allow people on them to work and access public funds.

We have made it as easy as possible for people to apply. We have simplified the application form to make it quick and easy to use. We have increased capacity in visa application centres across Europe. Following advice from security and intelligence agencies that it was safe to do so, we have removed the need for biometrics to be taken from those with valid Ukrainian passports before arrival in the UK, allowing the vast majority of applicants to apply entirely online. We regularly monitor the scheme's operational performance, bringing in additional caseworkers to ensure Ukrainian applications are prioritised. Our humanitarian response has involved the whole of Government, local authorities and the devolved Administrations, and we will keep working together to support Ukrainians who want to come to the UK.

Yvette Cooper: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. This visa system is simply not working. It is leaving thousands of families in limbo because of Home Office bureaucracy. A businesswoman who is trying to get her sister and daughter to come here on the family visa scheme is still waiting, 10 days after she applied to the Home Office. A constituent of mine in Pontefract who applied under the Homes for Ukraine scheme has been waiting nearly two weeks to hear anything back from the Home Office. Another British host who applied for a visa for a woman undergoing a high-risk pregnancy has waited 12 days for a reply. Despite the Home Office helpline saying that she would be treated as a priority, that woman has had to travel extensively to complete biometrics in Warsaw and has still received no reply.

A mother and two young sons who had been granted a family visa and were due to travel this week had their visa revoked at the last minute. They had been advised by the visa centre to apply for the Homes for Ukraine scheme as well, so that they could link up with a host family. Now the Home Office has revoked their first visa and said that they cannot travel, and it has told them nothing more about what is going on. This is Kafkaesque. What on earth is going on? Why is the Home Secretary so totally incapable of getting any grip on this, despite repeated questions we have asked?

Can the Minister tell us how many people have actually arrived on the Homes for Ukraine scheme? Why on earth is it too early to tell us? The Government should be able to give us the basic facts. On the family visas, 23,000 have been issued so far, but 25,000 people had already applied and submitted their applications more than two weeks ago, so it is clearly taking at least two weeks to clear cases. Even at the current rate, only 700 family visas have been issued since yesterday. At that rate, it is going to take well over a week just to clear the existing backlog of cases that he accepts have been submitted.

The Home Office has suddenly stopped publishing all the figures and deleted from its figures the thousands of people who are still waiting for a visa centre appointment. That is not good enough. It is not the kind of transparency we need to make sure that desperate people are getting the support they need. Why on earth is it taking so long? Why are we still demanding reams of bureaucracy and reams of information when the Government have been told by the refugees Minister and by Home Office officials that the security checks can be done really quickly? Why, then, is this taking so long? Why are they expecting people still to make these emergency journeys?

Tens of thousands of people are still stuck in the system. Families are desperate. People from across Britain have said that they want to help, yet the Home Office is letting the whole system down. Is that deliberate, or is it just total incompetence? Why on earth can the Home Secretary not get a grip on this and sort it out, to help desperate families?

Mr Speaker: Order. I grant urgent questions, but I do not make the rules, and they say that for each one the Member asking the question has two minutes. You have to stick to that, otherwise I will not be able to grant UQs. Please, can we just stick to the rules?

Yvette Cooper Apologies, Mr Speaker.

Kevin Foster: First, it is too early to say how many people have arrived under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, but we are now publishing details of visa grants. By 9 am today 3,705 visas had been granted, and the trajectory for visa grants is increasing every day. I remind hon. Members that at one point last week we issued nearly 6,000 family scheme visas in two days. Again, that shows the type of capacity available once we get decisions ready to be made, and we would expect to see a similar increase in trajectory on the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

On the accusation that applications are being deleted, what has actually happened is, first, a removal of duplicates, for example where someone applied initially with biometrics and then did so without biometrics. Where someone did not qualify for the family scheme but they have someone

in the UK who would be prepared to sponsor them—such as godparents, for the sake of argument—we transfer this over to the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Members will realise why that is a sensible and proportionate approach to take.

On the accusation about “reams of info”, we have cut back on what people are asked to supply. We do not need authorised translations and people can submit in Ukrainian, with the most basic of documentation: any evidence that shows residence in Ukraine. Again, we are not asking people to give us travel history or previous addresses; we are asking purely for something that shows they were resident in Ukraine in December and that there is a basic family link, if relevant, for the family scheme. We are cutting down the information purely to that which is necessary for vital safeguarding checks.

This is the latest in a number of humanitarian interventions and routes we have created over the past year. We saw the determination to help people in Afghanistan, from which we saw the biggest evacuation since Dunkirk; we saw the British national overseas route delivered, with more than 100,000 applications over the past year; and now we see these two routes for Ukrainians set up in record time, with tens of thousands of people already having visas under them. I just compare that with how the shadow Home Secretary got on with her own pledge to rehome one Syrian refugee.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): This is going to be a wonderful scheme and we are all looking forward to welcoming tens of thousands of Ukrainians to this country, but something is going wrong with the scheme right now. Tomorrow, the vast majority of sponsors will have waited two weeks and will not have heard anything at all. We are testing the patience of people in this country who have put themselves forward as sponsors and, much more importantly, we are letting down vulnerable individuals and families in Ukraine. We need to process only about 8,000 households, and we are talking about 20,000 or 30,000 applications in total. That is not a huge or insurmountable task, but it does require the Home Office to make sure that the resources and the leadership are in place to get this sorted. I hope that we have heard today from the Minister that that will now happen in the next few days.

Kevin Foster: My right hon. Friend is right to say that people want to get on and help. Tens of thousands of people throughout the country have made a very generous offer and they want to be able to extend that and for it to be taken up. We are rightly doing vital safeguarding checks. Sadly, we have had some pings on the police national computer in respect of some of the sponsors who have come forward, and we will need to consider them, but the vast and overwhelming majority of people want to do the right thing.

I appreciate my right hon. Friend's wish that we go faster. As I have touched on, the rate at which visas are being granted is increasing. As we have seen with the Ukraine family scheme, once people have passed through a number of checks, we can quickly start to issue a large number of visas, which is what we plan to do.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Four million people are seeking sanctuary, but just 0.6% of them have been offered

[Stuart C. McDonald]

sanctuary in the UK. That is the inevitable consequence of using a clunky, bureaucratic and, frankly, traumatising visa system to deal with an urgent humanitarian crisis.

Around 140 countries do not require Ukrainians to have a visa before they travel there; we say it should be the same for the United Kingdom. I appreciate that the Government do not want to go as far as that, but why not allow even some Ukrainians—for example, those with biometric passports and children—to travel visa-free? That would free up significant capacity to speed things along. If that is not possible, will the Minister publish the reasons why he thinks it is not? If it is really all about security, why are there any other visa requirements at all? Why not grant a visa to any Ukrainian refugee who applies for one?

Finally, I welcome the Ukraine extension scheme that was announced this week, but it still excludes the possibility of people bringing their family here under the family scheme. A seasonal agricultural worker who switches to that route will still not be able to sponsor their family under the family route. Why not allow that to happen? Why not also allow Ukrainians whose visas expired before January to apply under the extension scheme? Until that changes, the Government are still excluding the possibility of huge swathes of the Ukrainian community here being joined by their families. Allowing that is the least we should be doing.

Kevin Foster: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's questions and the way he put them. I also appreciate the fact that there is a fundamental difference in respect of our belief, based on the advice we have received, that there needs to be a visa process with safeguarding checks and certain key security checks. We would not usually publish such advice, particularly when it is from intelligence and security agencies, for reasons with which the hon. Gentleman will be familiar.

On the hon. Gentleman's specific points about the Ukraine extension scheme, provided that the people on that scheme have at least six months' leave to remain—which they will have—they will be able to sponsor people under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. He gave the particular example of seasonal workers; the bigger challenge there will be to ensure that there is appropriate accommodation. I do not think any of us would advocate that it would be sensible to bring people into the UK without at least having an idea of where they would spend their first night in bed.

We have worked with the Scottish Government on their super-sponsor scheme, which allows someone who does not have a sponsor to come here, with the Scottish Government in effect becoming their sponsor here in the UK. Applications for that scheme have been received and we have been pleased to work on it with the Scottish Government and, in particular, with Neil Gray, to whom I pay tribute from the Dispatch Box for his constructive work.

Strong progress is being made. We have seen what we have already done with the family scheme; we would now expect to see the same trajectory for the Homes for Ukraine scheme. The question asked in the previous session on this issue may perhaps be asked in this one, and we still believe it is right that we do safeguarding checks, particularly given that children will potentially come to live with adults they have not previously met.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): The experience that I have had in Christchurch, where we have already welcomed some Ukrainians who have arrived, has been much more positive. I thank the Minister and his team for being so accommodating towards MPs who raise particular issues. Will he encourage individuals and families who want to take advantage of the schemes and are finding bureaucratic problems to contact their MPs? Everyone who has contacted me has had a satisfactory result.

Kevin Foster: I am pleased to hear of the results that my hon. Friend has been able to achieve for his constituents, as he always does. It is good to see people arrive and to see communities such as Christchurch stepping up and doing their bit. It is encouraging that we have seen offers coming in from throughout the UK, rather than just from areas that have had, let us say, more of a tradition of taking part in the local government-based resettlement schemes. It is very good to hear of my hon. Friend's experience. I have had constituent contact, as I am sure other colleagues have. MPs from all parties are doing their bit to advance cases when they are contacted.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I really do not understand why the Minister says that it is too early to know how many have arrived on the Homes for Ukraine scheme, because he has also just said that it is very important that the Home Office knows where people spend their first night in the UK. Perhaps he will be able to enlighten us on when he will be able to tell us the numbers.

As an example of the ongoing problems with bureaucracy, may I just tell the Minister about the case of Anna Kalyata? She has just given birth in temporary accommodation in Poland, having fled Ukraine. She does not speak English and, even though she has been matched under the sponsorship scheme, she has been told that she needs to have a birth certificate for the baby to allow the baby to get a visa. She is in a foreign country, traumatised by war and is now thinking of going back to Ukraine to register the birth. Surely the Home Office can have a more compassionate response to women, children and babies.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for her question. It would not be appropriate for me to go into an individual case on the Floor of the House. Certainly, we are able to process children. We are conscious that some children, including some who have arrived from Ukraine, will not have any documentation. I am happy to look at the particular example that she has cited, but she should appreciate that there are particular issues, as touched on in the previous urgent question, about children being removed particularly from Poland and the border countries, which is why we have to go through certain checks.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It is quicker than getting a driving licence—I will give the Minister that. The service provided in Portcullis House is excellent. I took a case down there this morning. The person called up the record. It was received on 19 March. All the information is there and correct. It is simply awaiting a decision. Now that is disappointing, is it not?

Kevin Foster: Yes, I share my right hon. Friend's disappointment, but as I have touched on, we are seeing the pace of decision making increase, as happened with the Ukraine family scheme. At one point last week, we saw 6,000 visas issued under that scheme in just two days. The trajectory is increasing; it is on a similar trajectory to the Ukraine family scheme, and we look forward to being able to make decisions very shortly on the vast majority of cases.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I echo the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) that neither visa system is working currently at the pace required. May I ask the Minister how applications are being prioritised, and specifically whether he can assure me that those with serious medical conditions, or who are at risk because of their location, are at the top of the list when it comes to processing their applications?

Kevin Foster: Certainly, where there are specific issues, we will look to prioritise a case. We make the point that people do not need to wait in Ukraine for a decision: they are welcome to move or to apply from safe third countries. As was touched on in the previous urgent question, the actual challenge for many people will be getting from where they are in Ukraine to a safe neighbouring country, not least given some of the war crimes that are being committed by Russian forces against civilians, to which those travelling are vulnerable. We will prioritise where appropriate, and, certainly, if there are particular instances of where that needs to be done, I am happy to hear them.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): May I say to my hon. Friend that from my experience, I support the comments of my right hon. Friends the Members for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne)? I welcome the progress that the Government are making, but may I say to him that I had a constituent in Poland at the weekend trying to help, and that, on the frontline, access to visas and applications is still far too difficult? What more can the Government do to simplify the process so that we can help these migrants from Putin's violence?

Kevin Foster: We have certainly provided support, and we have a support hub out in Poland. We have also simplified the form quite significantly since the launch of the Ukraine family scheme, removing a number of parts that did not require basic security and safeguarding checks. Working with our colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, we are keen to look at what further support we can provide not only to those who are applying to our two visa schemes, but, for example, to the relatively small number of surrogate babies that will be born British in Ukraine. We will look at what support we can have available once people have crossed the border into Poland.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I echo the comments of the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) about what has been available in PCH. I have certainly made some real progress with cases, but I am concerned that those staff will not be available during recess. Even a skeleton staff would be

helpful there. Following on from the comments of the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, I have a three-year-old stuck in Poland, with a birth certificate but not a passport. UK Visas and Immigration has said she needs biometric security clearance as a result. Are we really going to make the family wait weeks or even months to join relatives in the UK because UKVI thinks their toddler needs a security check?

Kevin Foster: We would prioritise cases involving children as having safeguarding checks rather than security checks, which were touched on in another context earlier today. In terms of our visa application centre capacity, given that the vast majority are now applying without needing to make a biometric appointment, there is capability. Certainly in urgent or compassionate cases, we would look to find availability quickly and, as touched on in answer to a previous question, we would look to turn around the visa decision quickly as well.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Last week, at the Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly, the UK delegation was able to meet our Polish parliamentary counterparts to thank them for everything their country has been doing to welcome such an enormous influx of refugees from Ukraine, and to ask them what more the UK could do to make the process work better for those who want to come here. They made two constructive suggestions, which I will feed in. The first is that they are using the twinning network between communities across Europe; I urge the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to look at that network and establish links such as those with Malvern, where 200 families want to welcome refugees but do not necessarily know where they can locate them. Secondly, they wanted to see the application form written in Ukrainian. I wonder whether that is something that could easily be done.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for her positive suggestions. The Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), is here on the Front Bench and can look at using the twinning network—particularly, ideally, where there may be some language ability in either Polish or Ukrainian. That would be useful in helping people to settle, certainly in their first few days. In terms of engagement with Poland, I was with the Polish ambassador this week, talking to them directly and hearing what their priorities are. Their key focus is that we need to support the vast majority of people who will look to remain in the region, rather than just seeing resettlement as the priority, but it was useful to hear their thoughts on what more we could do to support them.

On moving the application form into Ukrainian, we are looking to provide guidance on how to fill it in in Ukrainian and Russian, since some Ukrainians speak Russian as their first language. To translate the whole form would require a significant amount of technical work; moreover, the vast majority of our decision makers operate in English and it would be difficult to find large numbers of Ukrainian speakers who we could deploy into UKVI's operation. Certainly, our goal is to make it relatively simple, so that people can fill in the basic information that they need to for the safeguarding check. Any documents they submit do not need to be

[Kevin Foster]

translated. Birth certificates and any other proofs or documents we might ask for can be submitted in Ukrainian, given that the decision makers are familiar with the documents themselves. Certainly, we are looking at how we can advance the digital capability and the guidance so that people know what they are doing step by step as they go through the form.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Many emails I have received have a common theme. I will just quote a couple:

“I have had to write...no fewer than five different applications in order to be able to comply with the requirements of the scheme.”

Another said:

“The forms, aimed at Ukrainians, were hard for me to fill out and I speak English and am used to forms, but I managed to help them complete the application. The applications were submitted on Saturday 19th March. Since then we have heard nothing.”

The first email went on:

“While our friend is in danger, the Home Office is mired in bureaucracy, prioritising form over human life. It looks to me as if the whole process is going to take weeks and weeks.”

Will the Minister admit that there are blockages in the systems, and will he do something to clear them?

Kevin Foster: As we have already touched on, we are now seeing the rate of grants increasing significantly on the Homes for Ukraine scheme, as we saw with the Ukraine family scheme. I have touched on the number of visas that we issued in just two days last week under that scheme. We expect to see the same with this scheme, and we will soon see a very large number of the applications that have been made granted.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I have been overwhelmed by the generosity of the British people, including those in my constituency of Batley and Spen, who have offered to open their homes to Ukrainian families. They desperately want to help and are ready and waiting. Can the Minister tell these good people why the Government are making it so difficult for families who are fleeing the devastating attack on their country by asking them to fill in, as we have heard, these lengthy, multiple-page online forms, often in English, and upload so many documents? What is being done to ditch this extra bureaucracy, which takes caseworkers days to review, and what is being done to speed up the whole process?

Kevin Foster: I certainly would not say that it would take caseworkers days to review an individual form. In many cases, the online forms are literally click-through pages to say, “No, I don’t have a criminal record”. We have touched on how the process is accelerating. We will see many more applications granted and many of the people making such generous offers getting to be able to play their part.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituents Nick and Aileen Walker registered as hosts on 14 March and have been in touch with a family from Ukraine that they wish to host—a grandmother, mother and 11-month-old baby daughter, who registered their applications on 18 March. Can the Minister confirm how long people will be expected to wait for this visa

paperwork to be processed, because it is increasingly difficult for families such as these to wait in insecure accommodation in a range of different countries in Europe, when they should be in a place of safety and sanctuary in Glasgow?

Kevin Foster: As touched on, we are now seeing the rate of visa grants accelerating and we should continue to see that over the next week. We would expect to see the majority of current cases being decided fairly shortly. We are very conscious that people do want to get settled. It is great to see the community in Glasgow standing up on this scheme in the way that it has on every other refugee resettlement scheme and supporting those claiming asylum here in the UK.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I want to question the Minister on the capacity in the system at the moment. If 200,000-odd people have come forward through the Homes for Ukraine scheme and only roughly a quarter of applications have been processed so far, what is he going to do to make sure that there is enough capacity in the system to allow everyone who wants to come here to do so? What conversations has he been having with the Treasury to ensure that we have the resources to do this?

Kevin Foster: The scheme is uncapped from a visa point of view. I suspect that the issue of conversations with the Treasury may be more for the next UQ about the funding that will be provided to local communities where people are sponsoring. We are clear: it is an uncapped scheme with no restrictions. If very large numbers of people want to sponsor individuals, we welcome that. One of the reasons we have gone down the path of appealing directly to the public is that it has proved, first, to deliver far more spaces much more quickly; and secondly, to be much better value for money than more traditional schemes, as, sadly, we have seen with Afghanistan. When a large number of people arrived, offers via local councils from communities did not come forward to the necessary level and therefore we ended up having to pay for people to stay in hotels.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I have an urgent case that I need to raise on this last day before we rise for recess. The mother has a five-year-old. She is in Italy. She is eight months pregnant. If she does not get a visa literally in the next few days, she will not be allowed to fly by her doctor. She speaks no word of Italian and is really worried about having to give birth with doctors that she cannot communicate with. Meanwhile we have a host ready and waiting for her in Oxfordshire. Will the Minister urgently take up this case and help us to get her over?

Kevin Foster: I am very happy to do so if the hon. Lady gives me the details after this session.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The cases of the constituents in Manchester who contact me generally follow the same pattern, which is that they do the hard work of locating and liaising with the family in Ukraine, they submit the complicated application form, they get a receipt and then they hear nothing. That is the frustration. People are being left in limbo either in Poland or under shelling in Ukraine. One of my constituents phrased it very well. He said: “All I want to do is to

make sure there is nothing we haven't done which may be holding up the application process." If the Government will not sort out a simple emergency visa scheme, can they at least sort out the communication so that people know what is going on?

Kevin Foster: That is a fair point about updating people. Certainly people would be contacted if there was something that was needed from them, rather than us conducting the checks he would expect us to conduct from a safeguarding and security perspective. But a fair point has been made by colleagues across the House about the communication that needs to be sent out to those who have made applications, and we are certainly happy to take that forward.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): I am not sure the Minister is actually hearing the issues being raised in the House about the shambles of this system, which is proving impossible. One of my constituents has offered their home to a family they are in touch with, and it is heartening to see how many families have come forward, but this family cannot flee Ukraine until their visa is approved because their son is disabled. Living in a refugee camp would prove too difficult. They are living with the daily trauma of sirens. Sheltering is proving to be too difficult with their son, yet they are still waiting for a visa from the Home Office. What can the Government do to step in urgently, issue a visa and look at this and many of the other issues like it to resolve this crisis immediately?

Kevin Foster: As we have touched on, in total we have already issued more than 27,000 visas across the two schemes. We have touched on how the Homes for Ukraine scheme is accelerating the number of visa grants, and that means that for those who urgently need it, it will be there. We have already touched on the ability for Members to put forward cases, where there is the need to prioritise them.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Constituents of mine have been in touch from Poland, where they have been helping a Ukrainian mother and daughter to make their way to the UK. I understand that one of the many barriers that they faced was a visa centre without any working printers due to the failure of an outsourced service. As the UK Government are insisting on this visa process, what undertaking can the Minister give us today on the steps being taken immediately to prevent the visa process breaking down, because issues such as this are leaving vulnerable people in limbo and high and dry?

Kevin Foster: Absolutely. The move to divert the vast majority of people applying to both these schemes away from visa application and the need to have a formally printed vignette, which is what the hon. Lady is referring to, has made a dramatic difference in terms of capability. Certainly our contractors assure us that printing facilities are available, but if there is a specific example, I am happy to look at it, because we need to ensure that where people need a vignette, it is issued. We have been engaging with carriers to ensure that they then accept the form that it is fixed to when people present themselves at airports. We have had that issue flagged to us, too.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Can I say to the Minister that I still think an emergency visa scheme would be far less bureaucratic than the system we have now? I remind him that some of the most vulnerable people have fled their homes without technology and the paperwork necessary for them to be able to complete the forms. What is the Minister doing to ensure that these people are not forgotten? What changes is he making to the system so that people who do not have the technology or the paperwork do not get left behind?

Kevin Foster: First, I am not sure what taking time out to set up another visa scheme would deliver in this context, compared with the refinements to the process that we already have in place. I can appreciate the argument about not having a visa. We do not agree with it and I think it is a bit odd to go down that path, but our decision makers have extensive flexibility. We appreciate that the type of documents we might normally ask for, such as translated copies of birth certificates, will not reasonably be able to be got hold of in a warzone. Our decision makers, subject to certain national security and safeguarding red lines, which the House would expect us to have for the protection of all involved, have a large amount of flexibility about the situations they can accept. Likewise, they can also consider families as a group. If one person has particular items, the decision maker can then apply that as proving the position of the rest of the family. It is safe to say there is significant flexibility for our decision makers, recognising the situation people are facing.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Minister should recognise that the visa requirement is the root of the problem. Like most Members, I have been contacted by constituents who are desperate to help. They have signed up to the Homes for Ukraine scheme and identified families who they can assist, but they have run into red tape and bureaucracy. How can the Minister assure the Gibbs-Hall family from Dunoon, Jim and Margaret Love from Helensburgh, Sam Gallagher from Clynder, the Douglas family from Oban, Eddie McCreath from Lochgilphead and Hamish McKinnon from the Arrochar hotel, who all stand ready and willing to help with offers of accommodation and employment, that their incredible kind offers of help will not go to waste?

Kevin Foster: It is great to hear that so many people are stepping forward. As the local MP, I am sure the hon. Gentleman is proud to see how his community is stepping forward to offer a hand of friendship and practical support. It is worth noting that this is the biggest offer of housing in people's own homes since the wartime evacuation, which shows the scale.

The pace and trajectory of visas being granted is increasing each day. We saw that with the Ukraine family scheme, and we now look to see it with the Homes for Ukraine scheme so that people's generous and heartfelt offers will soon be taken up.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for our meeting yesterday. He was able to help with two cases, one involving some 33 Ukrainians who are coming to my constituency. He helped to make that happen, for which I thank him and his staff. These things work only because staff make Ministers look good, and I say that

[Jim Shannon]

with all honesty. The same is true of my office, by the way, and I am not saying it is not the same for anyone else.

Checks must be made for the many Ukrainians who do not have a passport. My office has been greatly aided by a young man in an office hub in Poland, who went so far as to give his mobile phone number to the church group that is bringing people to my constituency. The Home Office is carrying out biometric checks, and so on, but does it have enough translators? The church group left its fluent English speaker in Poland to help this dedicated man with other applications, but he cannot be there every day. Is there any way of giving him some assistance?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments about the staff who have been working on this scheme. Following other comments and feedback, we are considering the provision in our hub over the recess in addition to the phoneline for Members of Parliament.

Many of the staff in our visa application centres are locally employed, so many will be native Polish speakers rather than being UK staff sent out to Poland. Many will be familiar with and fluent in the local language, and they should be able to support people in making applications. We also have military and other support from the Home Office on the ground to work with people capable of speaking a basic level of English to support people in making applications.

As I said to the hon. Gentleman yesterday, it is great to see the community in Strangford stepping forward to help 35 people. People can be supported to make their application, and they do not have to use the terminal themselves. People are welcome to make an application for others if that is easier in the circumstances.

Homes for Ukraine Scheme

11.47 am

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities if he will make a statement on the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): President Putin's bloody invasion is a barbaric and unprovoked attack on the people of Ukraine, who are fighting a daily battle for freedom. The UK has stood shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine at every stage of the conflict, including sending extensive military supplies months before the Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine. We are steeled to stand with Ukraine for the long haul.

In this country there has been an outpouring of public support for the Ukrainian people, and we have matched the generosity of the British public with an ambitious humanitarian offer to Ukrainians who wish to come to the UK to escape the conflict. As hon. Members will know, since the Home Office opened and expanded the Ukrainian family scheme and my Department launched the Homes for Ukraine scheme with our Home Office colleagues, both schemes have received thousands upon thousands of applications from people willing to open their heart and their home to a new guest.

We have balanced the need to move rapidly with the equal need to get the Homes for Ukraine scheme right. The visa application process opened on Friday 18 March, since when we have seen the first arrivals come to the UK. Members on both sides of the House are as invested as we are in making the scheme as efficient and effective as possible. We are minimising bureaucratic foot-dragging and cutting unnecessary red tape, while making sure people are set up in the best possible situation to start a life in the UK and to access the right local services and support.

The scheme will be a success only if local and national Government work as one, so we are providing councils with £10,500 per guest to help with all the support they will need. We have been working with the Local Government Association and individual councils across the country to fine-tune the scheme's practicalities and logistics. As the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities said, we will keep things under review to ensure that local government has and gets what it needs. We are also working closely with the devolved Administrations to ensure that we have a consistent offer across the country. Some 4 million Ukrainians have been displaced by this bloody and unjust war so far. The UK will continue to respond to the gravity of the conflict and we will continue to work with Members of the House to open up our communities to Ukrainians in the weeks and months ahead.

Mike Amesbury: Nearly 150,000 people have signed up to sponsor Ukrainian refugees in a testament to the generous spirit of our nation and regions, yet that generosity risks being wasted because the figures released confirm that just 2,700 visas have been granted by the Government under the scheme so far. Of course, visas being granted are not the same as refugees arriving here after fleeing for their lives from the bullets, missiles and bombs. Can the Minister tell the House

how many refugees have arrived in the UK through the scheme and what has gone wrong so far in getting them here?

After the issue with visas, things are even less clear. There remain real concerns among councils that have not been addressed. How will they know when refugees have arrived in their authority and require services? Proactive data sharing is simply not good enough and safeguarding is falling down. Do the checks on sponsor families need to have been fully completed before a family can begin travelling to the UK? Does the £10,500 for councils, which the Minister mentioned, cover refugees only in this scheme or in the family visa scheme too?

There are real fears of a homelessness crisis if sponsorships break down. As reported yesterday by the Local Government Association, nearly 150 Ukrainians have already presented themselves to councils as homeless having fled the conflict to stay with family members in the UK who have no room. Can the Minister tell me and the House what urgent guidance and support his Department is giving to councils on those cases?

The Government must now take an active role in matching sponsors to refugees, otherwise the generosity of people who want to help will be wasted. The British people have stepped up in Ukraine's hour of need; it is clear that the Government urgently need to do the same.

Eddie Hughes: I think that the Government are acting urgently. It is testament to the efforts of people in an incredible civil service who are prepared to work very long hours, seven days a week and to pivot from their previous day jobs to move in an agile fashion to deal with the trauma that that country is facing and ensure that the maximum number of people have visas granted and can have a secure and safe home in this country. It is disappointing, therefore, that the hon. Gentleman, whom I respect tremendously, thinks that the Government and the civil service are not responding urgently.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned a figure of 150,000; I believe that the number of people who have expressed an interest and are prepared to open up their homes is closer to 200,000. *[Interruption.]* It is slightly frustrating to answer one question and have Opposition Members race ahead to the three or four others that have been asked. Patience would be a virtue for everybody involved in this process—at least for the sake of this urgent question. Mr Speaker, do you not think it would be nice for them to wait for the answer before they get too carried away?

How will councils know? We have a matching process and once the sponsor has been matched with the guest online with the form, councils will be alerted so that they know that a match has been made for a sponsor in their area. They can then begin the process of preparation immediately.

Will checks need to be completed fully before people travel? Inasmuch as once the visa is granted, checks will already have started, we will already have started to investigate whether there has been criminality on the part of either party. We need to make absolutely sure that we are reassured of the safety on both sides of the equation—of the person travelling here and of the people opening up their homes. Those checks will be carried out initially and then further checks will be carried out by the receiving authority once it has been notified of the match.

Once the authority has been notified, it will be expected to go out and inspect the property to make sure it is appropriate for such people's needs, and begin the process of further checks, as required. For example, if there are children or vulnerable adults in the households that are coming, a further enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service check will be required.

With regard to the money, the £10,500 is for the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Obviously, for the rest of the elements of this scheme, we are making a very generous offer in that people who arrive in the UK will be allowed to work and claim benefits immediately, so that they can begin to integrate fully here.

Finally, on the 150 homeless people the hon. Gentleman mentioned, he will know that I, as the Minister for homelessness, have a very keen interest in this. We will be investigating to ensure that we completely understand what has led to such a situation. As a Government, with the charities and all involved—and MPs have a role in this—we need to make sure people understand that the most appropriate, safe and reliable route is that prescribed by the Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Almost 200,000 volunteers is of course absolutely brilliant, but the fact that only 2,000 or 3,000 people have yet benefited from it is obviously far from that. Can I encourage the Government to keep working to simplify the process, but also to raise awareness of this scheme? We have had complaints that there is a lack of awareness of it among those fleeing Ukraine.

We have heard about the possible dangers of people trying to abuse the system for trafficking or exploitation purposes. Is that not also an argument for considering empowering local authorities to act as super-sponsors? That would allow a greater opportunity for safeguarding and for appropriate matching to be done.

May I ask about the co-ordination of the three different schemes that now exist? For example, could people who arrive under the family scheme who cannot be accommodated by their relatives instead be matched to one of the volunteers under the sponsorship scheme? That would seem a very simple and obvious way to avoid the homelessness we have heard about. It would also address the concerns expressed by the immigration Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster)—when I raised the prospect of seasonal agricultural workers being able to bring in their families. Even if the families cannot be accommodated with them, why not use a community sponsorship scheme to solve that problem?

Local authority funding under this sponsorship scheme is excellent, but why is there no funding for areas where significant numbers of Ukrainians are arriving under the family scheme, for example? Should that not be looked at again? May I ask what thinking there has been about what will happen later this year if significant numbers of Ukrainians are no longer able to remain with their hosts?

Finally, we still have several thousand Afghans in hotels. Can volunteers be asked if they would be willing to take an Afghan as well?

Eddie Hughes: The hon. Gentleman mentions that 2,000 or 3,000 visas have been granted, but 27,000 visas have been granted across the two schemes, and I think we need to be mindful of that. On the super-sponsor route and the idea that councils might be allowed to do that, I think we need to tread cautiously. We have one scheme running, and we need to make sure this one is running as effectively and efficiently as possible.

I am absolutely delighted by the offer that has been made by the devolved Assemblies in Wales and Scotland. It is absolutely tremendous to see the work that is being done in Scotland, and it is a great demonstration of Governments working together across the United Kingdom to make this process work.

On moves between schemes, for the moment we are trying to ensure that people stick to one route wherever possible. We will keep this under constant review, because we need to make sure that we respond to a developing situation.

Finally, on Afghans, we learn from one scheme as we develop another, so as this one progresses we will understand what merits it has and what challenges it provides, and we will use that learning to determine what we can apply to other schemes in operation in this country.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I think the Minister is going to get asked these questions over and over again until we get some adequate answers from him.

First, it cannot be justified that councils are, quite rightly, getting £10,500 per year per refugee when refugees come over on the sponsor scheme—councils have to provide wraparound services; it is all there, it is all understood—but when refugees come under the family scheme, for the most part, apart from the housing checks, the council has to do everything to support them. Why is there no money under that scheme and yet £10,500 under the other scheme? Will the Minister explain the difference in terms of the offers that councils have to make to those refugees?

Secondly, the Local Government Association told the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee yesterday that 144 Ukrainian refugees have presented as homeless so far. They have come under a variety of schemes, with some under the sponsorship scheme, some through Ireland and other routes and some through the family scheme—that is because family members do not have to provide accommodation. The whole reason for the sponsorship scheme is that councils do not have enough affordable, readily available homes to house people. The choice is therefore to put these refugees into temporary accommodation—hotels—or to match them up with the generous offers that sponsors want to make in those communities. Yesterday, the Prime Minister accepted that councils should have access to the database of sponsors so that they can be responsible for matching up refugees or homeless people with sponsors who want to house them. Can the Government just get on with it?

Eddie Hughes: We are getting on with it. When the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) took the earlier urgent question, he explained how we

are ramping up the process and ensuring that it is working as efficiently as possible. On the difference between the two schemes, people are completely at liberty to apply through the Homes for Ukraine scheme instead. I think we understand that people in the UK who are having a family member coming to live with them will provide services such as help with learning English, so some support that might otherwise be provided by a council will be given by a family. I think that is the natural way. However, as I said, it is not an either/or option; people can choose to apply through the Homes for Ukraine scheme. I fully accept that there is a challenge with regard to housing, and that is why it is tremendous that 200,000 people have decided to open up their homes.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister highlighted that 200,000 people expressed an interest in the scheme, including many residents of my constituency. Stockwell Says Hello, which is helping to sponsor a Ukrainian family, contacted me recently because it could not find any clear guidance on the Government website. These questions have been asked time and again and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) said, the uncertainty may put off many people who want to show their generosity. On 8 March, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), said that 50 extra caseworkers had been trained to process applications. Does the Minister know how many of those caseworkers are in post and dealing with these applications?

Eddie Hughes: We can see this as an evolving process, with the Government continuing to ramp up and increase the resource committed. It would perhaps be unhelpful to provide a running commentary on the number of people working on the process, not least because there will be some ebb and flow given the number of people prepared to work over the weekend versus during the week. We are ensuring that the resource attributed to the effort is equal to the need and we are improving the fluency with which applications are being processed daily so that the maximum number of people who have submitted an expression of interest can house somebody from Ukraine.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Like others, I commend everybody who has come forward to support the Homes for Ukraine scheme. However, it is important to remember that those sponsors are the conduit between the Home Office, the scheme run by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the refugees with whom they have been matched up. They are awaiting home checks, and in Scotland we are still waiting for local authority guidance, which places enormous pressure on sponsors as they try to navigate the system. Indeed, my caseworkers are taking calls from distressed sponsors who want to ensure that they have done everything they can to get those whom they have sponsored safely to the UK as fast as possible. What conversations have been had about putting in place emotional support to help sponsors who are opening their homes?

Eddie Hughes: One thing we have seen is a tremendous effort by charities and non-governmental organisations who are incredibly well placed to offer the guidance and

support that the hon. Lady refers to. On advice for councils, I understand that in Scotland it will be the responsibility of the devolved Assembly to provide that. From the tremendous efforts that I have seen in its work so far, I think that, if that has not already been provided, it will be coming very soon.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What action has the Department taken following the letter to the Secretary of State last week from 16 refugee and anti-trafficking charities setting out their concerns about the Homes for Ukraine scheme potentially being a Tinder for sex traffickers? We have seen men advertising for Ukrainian wives, and children posting on Facebook. Does the National Crime Agency have a view about the scheme and is it looking at sites such as Vivastreet, which advertises trafficked women—I am particularly worried about Ukrainian trafficked women—for sex? Will the Minister say what exactly the Department is doing?

Eddie Hughes: The Government are alive to all the concerns that the right hon. Lady mentions. We are collectively putting in effort to ensure that we close off areas where there are problems. Fundamentally, we are making sure that safety checks are completed at the point that the application is submitted and subsequently that the enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks are carried out. Finally, a representative from the council will see the sponsor and the guest to determine whether there are any safeguarding concerns. There are multiple gates through which people will pass in order to maximise the application of safety at all stages.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Deborah Gourlay contacted me this morning to say that she has a flat in my constituency, wants to host somebody and has identified them—a mother and her young boy stuck in Warsaw. Deborah has put her application in, as has the other person, and they have heard nothing since. The email that they received basically said, “Don’t call us; we’ll call you.” How long will she have to wait before they can be matched up and this family can come to Glasgow?

Eddie Hughes: The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), might have considered some of those matters during the previous urgent question. The amount of resource that is being committed to this is increasing by the day. The fluency of the process is improving by the day and, hopefully, the answer to the hon. Lady’s question will be: very soon.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am really proud of how my constituents, council and local refugee groups, such as West London Welcome and Refugee Action, are working together to welcome Ukrainian refugees. We had had 80 into the borough by Tuesday and that will more than double by the weekend. That includes welcome packs, cash and mental health support, as well as homes. However, will the Minister address the issue of temporary accommodation and people declaring themselves homeless? As a result of his Government’s policies, particularly in London, we do not have temporary accommodation available. What will he do? People cannot go into hotels, because hotels still have Afghan refugees from last summer. Please sort this problem out.

Eddie Hughes: The Government have committed £2 billion over the next three years to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, so we are making considerable efforts in this area. We would obviously prefer people to be matched with a sponsor and for that sponsorship arrangement to be maintained. Subsequently, councils may have the opportunity to rematch with another sponsor available in the area as well, given the huge number of people who have come forward to offer their homes.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Hundreds of private groups have sprung up since the scheme was launched and their generosity is hugely welcome, but this complex and difficult task can no longer be left to private initiatives. When will the Government recognise that they need to step up and bring Government officials to the Ukrainian border, as at least 20 other European countries have, to make sure that those fleeing war and war crimes do not end up homeless on our streets?

Eddie Hughes: I am slightly confused—perhaps I do not completely understand the question—but I think that for the Government to do the matches would be inappropriate. It seems to me that the matches made so far by non-governmental organisations or charities are proving incredibly effective. That approach is ensuring that the matches are more likely to last. With the greatest respect, for the Government to be involved in putting people together would only take away our focus from the administrative element that we need to deal with. There are excellent charities and NGOs that are very capable and are engaging very passionately with the Government to offer their services; I think that that is proving the best route.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that if it were left to the individual sponsor and the refugees, the process would be a whole lot quicker. However, Kateryna and 11-year-old Vadym are living in temporary accommodation in Poland; a home and a school place are waiting for them in my constituency, but clearly the Home Office system of matching is not working. They are absolutely frustrated. They have a home waiting for them, so will the Minister step up, work with the Home Office and get them over to this country?

Eddie Hughes: The pace at which we are getting through applications is ramping up: we will very soon be working our way through more than 10,000 a week. I completely understand the frustration that the hon. Gentleman expresses, because we would all like to see the process working far more quickly than it is already, but we are committed to ensuring that it works more quickly by the day.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): We are all so proud of our constituents who have stepped up to be hosts. We should equally be proud of the council officers who are scrambling yet again and will absolutely deliver. They need two things to make their lives easier. The first is the housing checklist that was promised on Tuesday but is still not in place; the worry is that people will be put in homes that are not suitable. The second is DBS checks. The Minister will be aware that, during the pandemic, powers were delegated to second-tier authorities to help to make the checks work.

[Layla Moran]

That legislation has expired, which means that it can be done only at county level; in Oxfordshire, only three people are allowed to do it. Will the Minister have a look at those two issues and come back to us as quickly as possible? If we need new legislation, we should be ready to make it.

Eddie Hughes: Yesterday, I met the leader of the District Councils' Network, who explained that the checking process with properties seemed to be going very smoothly, that councils were completely familiar with what they were expected to do, and that they were making the appropriate checks. What I think we need to understand is that sometimes we do not need to be totally prescriptive. Councils have great experience in the area and can use common sense and be proportionate in the checks that they make. I think that those checks are being carried out and that appropriate property is being identified.

I agree with the hon. Lady about the fantastic effort. This feels like a period of genuine national endeavour. I commend all colleagues across the House and their staff who have engaged with the process and are working tirelessly on behalf of constituents to ensure that problems are overcome and matches are made. Long may that continue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the scheme and thank the Minister for his answers. Northern Ireland, with a population of 1.8 million, has had more than 6,000 expressions of interest for the Homes for Ukraine scheme. As usual, the set-up in Northern Ireland, with council operations divided, is leading to delays in carrying out checks. Will the Minister confirm the answer to a technical question? If a family have in place the police checks that they need to work with children—the enhanced disclosure—can those checks be used or will new DBS or enhanced disclosure forms still be needed?

Eddie Hughes: That does feel like a very technical question, particularly for me. If the hon. Gentleman emails me, I will ensure that the appropriate Minister and civil servant respond accordingly.

Business of the House

12.13 pm

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): It is a pleasure to see the hon. Lady back in her place. The business for the week commencing 18 April will include:

MONDAY 18 APRIL—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 19 APRIL—Second Reading of the Online Safety Bill.

WEDNESDAY 20 APRIL—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Subsidy Control Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Building Safety Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Nationality and Borders Bill.

THURSDAY 21 APRIL—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Judicial Review and Courts Bill, followed by a general debate on childhood cancer outcomes. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 22 APRIL—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 25 April will include:

MONDAY 25 APRIL—Consideration of Lords amendments, followed by consideration of a carry-over motion relating to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, followed by consideration of a carry-over motion relating to the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, followed by consideration of a carry-over motion relating to the High Speed Rail (Crewe-Manchester) Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business and his kind welcome back; my deputy, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for covering for me so skilfully; and hon. Members for their good wishes when I was laid low with covid last week. I will close for the Opposition in today's debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment, which in my view is a jewel in the crown of democratic processes in this place. I will say more then, but for the benefit of those who will sadly not be joining us—how could they miss it?—let me wish everybody a happy recess.

It occurs to me on looking at the business statement that I do not yet see the COP15 debate that I believe we were promised would be rescheduled to after the recess but before Prorogation, because it has to come before COP15 itself. I may have got that wrong—it may be that my covidness has led to my missing something—but I would be grateful if the Leader of the House addressed that point.

The Government have now published the Arctic strategy. Her Majesty's Opposition welcome confirmation that Russia and China are growing threats in the high north, but unfortunately there is little commitment to new action. Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine has demanded an immediate response, but clearly we are still in the era of fighting big tank battles in Europe. Other European Governments are now reviewing their defence spending. Can the Leader of the House explain why no review of defence spending has been announced? There is no reform of military procurement, no real change to the

real cut in day-to-day Ministry of Defence spending, and less money for forces recruitment, training, pay and families. Will he ask the Defence Secretary to come to the House and give a statement?

Yesterday, the Transport Secretary gave us an update on the disgraceful situation with P&O Ferries. The steps announced by the Government are welcome, and we support them, but they are absolutely the bare minimum. The Government must ensure that no public money will be handed out to companies that disregard workers' rights. They should also go further and introduce legislation as soon as possible to ban fire and rehire completely, once and for all. Can the Leader of the House explain why the Government are refusing to do so and are continuing to let down British workers?

The Conservatives' flagship tutoring programme has been a disaster. It has failed our children, it has wasted millions of pounds of public money, and last month it had reached just a third of the promised 2 million courses. Today, the Government have sneaked out, in a written statement, the fact that they will be sacking the private provider to which they outsourced the programme. Labour's ambitious plan for recovery would deliver tutoring, breakfast and after-school clubs and mental health counsellors in every school, supporting every child to learn, play and develop. Could we have an urgent statement in the House from the Education Secretary about why, under this Government, the future of our children's education seems to be nothing more than an afterthought?

The majority of households in the UK will see a £1,300 average year-on-year increase in their bills by October. Some 6.5 million households across the country face fuel poverty, yet the Government refuse to act. Labour has put forward a proposal for a one-off windfall tax on oil and gas producers, which would cut household energy bills by up to £600, helping households that need it most—including constituents of Conservative Members, who might want to listen to them. Can the Leader of the House explain why the Government are happy to keep raising taxes for hard-working families, but refuse to raise them for oil and gas companies?

The Chancellor has handed 15 tax rises to working people. For every £6 that this Tory Government have taken, they are giving only £1 back, right when working families are feeling the pinch the most. British people are facing the worst fall in living standards on record. Prices are rising in supermarkets, at petrol pumps and on our electricity bills. At the worst possible time, the Government are choosing to put up national insurance contributions for millions of working people. Could the Leader of the House ask the Chancellor to come to this Chamber and explain to the people of this country why, unlike the Labour party, the Tories are not on their side?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady pointed out that we would be opposite each other again for the pre-Adjournment debate. I am not sure whether the word that she used was “jewel” or “duel”. I look forward to whichever it turns out to be, but it certainly feels like a duel this morning. The hon. Lady is back with a vengeance, and it is good to see her in her place.

The hon. Lady began by asking about a COP15 debate. That is a matter for the Backbench Business Committee. The Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), said he wanted to

have that debate, and there will be an opportunity to reschedule it at some point in the near future. We will try to work with the Chair of the Committee to deliver it.

The hon. Lady went on to talk about defence, and about defence spending. I hope she will recognise that we are the biggest spenders on defence in Europe. We are the second largest contributor to NATO, after the United States. We are exceeding the 2% GDP target. We have committed ourselves to £24 billion of increased defence spending over the next four years. We are world leaders in defence spending, and our armed forces are recognised around the world as the highest-quality armed forces available to any nation on this earth. That is a record of which to be enormously proud, and it is being demonstrated in Ukraine, whose defence services are making use of UK tech as we speak.

The hon. Lady then raised the subject of P&O. As she will know, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport was at the Dispatch Box yesterday explaining how he was going to deal with what was no less than a brazen breaking of employment law on the part of the chief executive. The way in which P&O has treated its own staff can only be condemned as despicable, and my right hon. Friend has urged it to reconsider, but yesterday he set out a nine-point plan consisting of a series of commitments to protect seafarers in the future. I should be happy to read it to the House, but it is available in *Hansard*. My right hon. Friend should be commended for the action that he is going to take.

When it comes to education, I think we should recognise that progress has been made, but there is further progress to come. We should be proud of and support the £5 billion education recovery fund and the schools White Paper, but even the Secretary of State for Education will acknowledge that there is more to be done, and I think that if the hon. Lady keeps an eye on the Dispatch Box she will see, in the near future, the Secretary of State announce action to continue the improvement in our education services.

The hon. Lady finished by talking about the cost of living and the challenges that we face. She will know that, given what is happening in Ukraine and its impact on global energy markets, a huge ripple is taking place in the value of energy across the world. We are well aware of that, which is why the Chancellor of the Exchequer stood here last week and set out his plans to try to help hard-working people and their families. Taking 5p off fuel duty was a big step—it means £5 billion a year less tax—and support is being provided through other mechanisms as well.

However, the best way out of poverty is through work. The fundamental difference between us and the Opposition is that we believe in a hand up while they believe in a handout. The best way for people to escape from poverty is by working and being able to keep more of their income and pay less tax, and the way in which we are making that possible means that those with the broadest shoulders carry the burden of taxation.

The hon. Lady wants us to impose a windfall tax on energy companies. Those companies are already paying 40% tax, which is nearly double what other sectors pay. There are 200,000 people employed in the sector. A windfall tax would disincentivise companies from making investments and push up the cost of energy, and the lowest-paid and most vulnerable people would find themselves picking up the tab. The Chancellor of the

[Mark Spencer]

Exchequer has ensured that the lowest paid will be taken out of tax altogether or will pay less tax, and I think that that is fair.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I want to raise an issue affecting my local area. It involves the North London Waste Authority and the unwanted building of a huge incinerator in Edmonton. Not a single Member of Parliament in the area, Labour or Conservative, actually wants the incinerator, and we do not need it and the fumes that it will emit.

The key factor is the existence of all the criteria that would normally cause the Government to haul in a project. The cost of this project has doubled from £600 million to £1.2 billion; this is meant to be a competitive bid, but that is not the case because the same organisation is still going to be involved; and, finally, even the chief executive of that organisation now says that this is excessive and unnecessary.

Given the latest information that the chief executive of the North London Waste Authority has received a salary increase from £300,000 to more than £600,000, it is clear that the organisation is out of control. It will not tell us what remuneration its officials—who are councillors—are receiving.

Why is it that not a single Government Department is prepared to stand up, haul this project in and call it to account, as would be done in the case of any other such project? People are burning public money, literally, on projects that are not wanted by the public and will pollute the atmosphere. Given the COP26 issues, why is that still happening, and may we have a debate about it now?

Mark Spencer: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue. I note that he secured a Westminster Hall debate on it in February. I am sure that local taxpayers will be very concerned about what he has reported to the House, and I shall be happy to take it up with Ministers on his behalf after this session.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): In view of the dramatic return of partygate, may we have a debate on what criminality actually is? I know it seems absurd to have to ask such a question, but I think we need to clear up this confusion. I may be being a bit naive here, but I think most people believe that criminality constitutes receiving a fine for breaking the law of the land after the conclusion of a police investigation. It seems that only No. 10 and the Prime Minister are unsure whether that central principle of law is actually the case. I do not know what it is about the issuing of 20 fines to different people that they find so difficult to understand, but perhaps we could have a debate to discover exactly what is going on. What with the Prime Minister being at odds with the Justice Secretary on this simple issue, the Government are now beginning to look singularly absurd.

Perhaps, on the same day, we could have a debate about the ministerial code and what happens if a Prime Minister breaks it. There seems to be some uncertainty about that as well. In December, the Prime Minister told the House that there were no parties and no rules were broken; now we find that 20 fines were issued to

people yesterday. I think we all know that this is closing in on the Prime Minister, but we need to establish the clear principle that if a Minister breaks the ministerial code, that Minister walks.

Today the Government are ending free covid tests, just as infection rates and hospitalisations go through the roof—and God knows how many MPs are suffering from covid this week, although it is good to see the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) back in her place. I am sure she will testify that it is a bit more than a little cold, despite what Conservative Members like to say.

This is a covid tax on the poor, which will only assist the further spread of the disease. This Government have been simply woeful on covid, but now they are being just plain negligent. May we have a debate in preparation of what more misery we can now expect?

Finally, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish you, the staff of the House and everyone who supports and serves us a good Easter break? I say to you all, “Enjoy yourselves, please make sure you have a covid-free break, and I will see you back, fit and healthy, in a couple of weeks.”

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. It is good to see him back in his place after his brief absence last week. He asks for a debate on the challenges that I think he referred to as “partygate”. I thought he might ask for a debate on mask wearing, because it would appear that the SNP has one rule in Scotland and another rule in London, given that the leader of his party turned up in London to a service at Westminster Abbey and felt it unnecessary to wear a mask in England, although in Scotland, apparently, she does have to wear one. I am not quite sure whether coronavirus is more dangerous in Scotland than it is in England, but I think the question of whether one should wear a mask in one's own country but not down in London would be worthy of debate.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the ministerial code. The rules around the ministerial code are absolutely clear and laid out, and Ministers should follow the ministerial code. There is no debate on that matter, and that is what happens. He also mentioned covid. It is a tribute to the Government that, although cases of covid are high, hospitalisations from it are much lower. That is because of our exemplary vaccination programme, which means that we are no longer in danger of hospitalisation. The great British public should be given the responsibility to make decisions, and I trust the public to make responsible decisions. If you are ill with covid, you should remain at home and isolate so that you do not inadvertently spread the disease. That is the way we should proceed from now on.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Can we have a debate on the shocking findings of the Ockenden report? Two years ago I wrote to the Health Secretary expressing the concern of a doctor in my constituency that an ideological attachment to so-called natural childbirth was jeopardising safety. I think we need a debate to see how great a role that problem played in the disasters that occurred in Telford.

Mark Spencer: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Secretary of State made a statement yesterday on this matter. I pay tribute not only to my right hon.

Friend but to my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), who have been vociferous in their pursuit of this matter. Some of the report's findings were frankly shocking. The good news is that things have now moved forward at the Shrewsbury hospital within the trust, and people can have confidence in maternity services across England. That is why we have announced a further £127 million of funding for maternity services, so that people can have confidence in those services.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I welcome the Financial Conduct Authority's redress scheme proposed this morning. It goes a fair way towards putting things right for the thousands of British Steel workers who were ripped off by pension sharks in 2017. The average loss was £60,000. However, can we have a Government statement from the Treasury on why it has taken the FCA five years to grip this scandal properly?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for pursuing that issue on behalf of his constituents. There are also Members on the Conservative Benches who have been vociferous in pursuing the rights of employees in the steel industry. I know that he will continue to pursue the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ensure that he gets answers for his constituents, and I shall write to the Chancellor on his behalf to ensure he gets answers to his questions.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): May I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as chairman of the Abraham Accords Group? Might my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on security in the Gulf and particularly on the role of Iran in destabilising the region? We have seen Iranian-backed Houthis carry out drone attacks on our friends in the UAE and missiles being launched into Saudi Arabia. We must not allow the dreadful events in Ukraine to distract us from the risks being faced by our allies elsewhere from a regime in Tehran with an abhorrent human rights record and a record of trying to destabilise its political and geographical neighbours.

Mark Spencer: My right hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the fact that Ukraine is not the only area in which our armed forces and security services are engaged. The Foreign Office is very much aware of the challenges in the middle east that he makes reference to, and he can rest assured that both the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence will continue to monitor Iran's activities. We need to send the strongest message to all regimes around the world that they should be as fair and open as they can be, and that we will not tolerate interference in other states.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) has already said, across the House we are all aware of how huge price increases in energy are impacting our constituents, and I believe the Government could be doing far more to help. However, public services and businesses are also impacted by these significant price rises. Local leisure centres, schools and businesses in my constituency have contacted me about having to make the impossible choice between delivering their services and paying their bills. Can we therefore have a debate in

Government time on the impact of energy prices on public services and businesses, and on the Government's so-far invisible strategy to support them?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. It is a little misleading—if I can say that—to say that the cost of living support that the Government are delivering is invisible. We have already offered £22 billion-worth of support for this financial year and the next. We are boosting income for the lowest paid and helping families with their household bills, but we are supporting businesses as well. Cutting 5p off fuel duty is a huge support to those businesses that have to transport their goods around. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has also supported businesses through the rates programme, and we are making sure that many small and medium-sized enterprises are taken out of local rateable values completely. That is support being given directly to the small businesses that I recognise are making a huge contribution to the economy and supporting people by employing our constituents.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), was taken unwell this morning, so on behalf of the Committee I would like to say to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) that we are negotiating with the sponsor of the motion and debate on COP26 and we are hoping to arrange a date soon. To my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, I should like to say that as the business for the week commencing 25 April looks a bit light, we are ready to supply proposals for debates if requested.

Can I also ask for a debate on efficiencies and effectiveness in local government? I, along with many of my colleagues, spend about 50% of my casework time dealing with the failure of my local council to provide a decent service, but this one tops the bill. I contacted Harrow Council on 15 October 2020 about an urgent disrepair problem in a council property provided to one of my constituents. Being diligent, I followed this up with the council no fewer than 19 times, and I was eventually promised, almost in blood, that I would get a reply by last Monday. I am still waiting. It is quite clear that on 5 May the voters of Harrow will get the opportunity to put in a Conservative-led council, rather than this inefficient and ineffective Labour-run council.

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We wish the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee a speedy recovery and hope he will soon be back in his place. We look forward to the COP15 debate, whenever it can be rescheduled.

My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to his local council. That sounds like a shocking litany of irresponsible—or lack of response, shall we say. I am sure he will continue to hold the council's feet to the fire, and in raising his question this morning, I am sure he will have contributed to its embarrassment. I look forward to a Conservative council in Harrow in the near future.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Tomorrow our constituents face a 54% increase in their fuel bills as the cap increases, but many of my constituents living in new developments at Kidbrooke are on district heating schemes and the cap does not apply. They are therefore directly exposed to the market cost of fuel. Can we have a statement

[Clive Efford]

when we return on the impact on those people, because they are facing huge increases in their fuel bills, way above those where the cap applies? This is creating financial difficulties for them, and they have not been dealt with or given any assistance by the Government.

Mark Spencer: To say that there is no assistance is, frankly, wrong, but I acknowledge that there are challenges with local heating systems, which I will raise directly with the relevant Minister on the hon. Gentleman's behalf. Given the uncertainty and challenges of the global energy market that we currently face not only in the United Kingdom but across the whole of Europe and North America, the Government are stepping in to try to help people who are facing those challenges. That is why we have introduced the £9.1 billion energy rebate scheme, and we are also increasing the value of the warm home discount to £150 in October and providing £1 billion through the household support fund, as well as winter fuel payments. All of that is assistance to his and my constituents in what is a very challenging situation globally, but I will raise the matter that he raised with the relevant Minister.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): The Labour party accepted the recommendations of the Leveson inquiry that it should publish all meetings between the shadow Cabinet and senior media executives and media owners. It has not done so since 2016. The Government publish them on a quarterly basis. May we have a debate on the lack of transparency on the relations between the Labour party and media executives and its trade union paymasters?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing attention to this important issue. It is important to the reputation of our democracy that we in this House are as transparent as possible with regard to those we meet, and when. It is staggering that the Labour party has failed to declare any meetings over the past six years. However, I am willing to give it the benefit of the doubt and believe that no such meetings have taken place. Perhaps the media have reached the same conclusion about the Labour party as the electorate did in December 2019.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We are six months into the biggest energy crisis in generations and it is five months since COP26, but reportedly the Prime Minister is still arguing with his Chancellor about what to do about the future of our energy. Businesses and households are calling out for certainty and clarity. Where is the energy strategy? Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to bring forward the energy strategy alongside a statement to the House?

Mark Spencer: The energy strategy is imminent. It is coming very soon—the hon. Lady will not have to wait very long. I would hope, however, that she recognises that the way to deal with the challenges of a fluctuating global energy market is to have a balanced approach to our energy supply. We should also make use of our own hydrocarbons in the North sea, as we move towards renewable resources, and we should invest in nuclear energy at the same time, to make sure that we have a balanced supply of energy in the United Kingdom.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on the further imposition of sanctions on members of the Russian armed forces? Although I am very pleased that Mikhail Mizintsev has been sanctioned this morning—he perfected his barbaric practices in pummelling Aleppo to the ground and is now doing the same to Mariupol—does the Leader of the House share my determination that sanctions must go down the ranks of the Russian military to mid-ranking and junior officers, and even to non-commissioned officers, if necessary, who are engaging in the barbaric practices of shelling residential areas to the ground?

Mark Spencer: Although I cannot comment on the specific case raised by my hon. Friend, the Deputy Prime Minister visited the International Criminal Court at The Hague earlier this month to offer practical support from the UK for investigating and prosecuting war crimes. As well as extra funding, that includes police and military analysis, specialist IT and legal expertise. The UK is also bringing together a broad coalition of countries to support those war crime investigations. The measures we have taken reflect the horror and the gravity of what Putin and his regime have done, violating the territorial integrity of a sovereign nation with an illegal and unjustified invasion. Anyone participating in that war should be under no illusion that the west will hold them to account for the decisions they make, and those generals and soldiers who are committing crimes will be held to account in the very near future.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): This week I was very proud to join a local group, Coventry City of Languages, in Speaker's House, where they were awarded the Your UK Parliament award for community campaign of the year. I first met the teachers back in 2020, before the campaign was formed, and have been proud to see them go from strength to strength. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Anna Grainger, Victoria Seaton and the rest of the team, and will he give Government time to discuss the benefits of language learning and the woeful lack of funding for foreign language teaching, especially in our primary schools?

Mark Spencer: I join the hon. Lady in commending her constituents for the great work they are doing. Speaking a second or third language is a great skill for life and can really assist young people not only in their careers but in travel around the world, and anything that the Government and we as the House of Commons can do to support people in learning a second or third language should be commended.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on issues affecting men and boys, I managed to secure a short Westminster Hall debate on the need for a men's health strategy. With nearly one in five men not making retirement, 13 men committing suicide every day, one man dying of prostate cancer every 49 minutes and 6,000 men dying an alcohol-related death each year, does the Leader of the House agree that this is a serious issue and that the need for a men's health strategy should be debated in this Chamber as soon as possible?

Mark Spencer: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing his Westminster Hall debate last week. There are important health issues affecting men across the

country. We know that some men are less likely than women to seek help or to talk about suicidal feelings, and some can be reluctant to engage with health or other support services. My hon. Friend asks for a debate in the Chamber. He will be aware that Government time for general debates is at a premium and that Government time is primarily used for legislation, but I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate. He will also have the opportunity to raise the matter at Health questions on 19 April.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I welcome the Leader of the House's comments a moment ago on transparency. The Government claim that there is transparency on covid contracts, but this morning, as has happened many times before, serious questions grounded in hard evidence were answered with vague and opaque platitudes. It is time for this Government to truly act in the public interest and arrange a debate in Government time to address the management of PPE contracts, and to properly account for the billions of pounds of taxpayers' money that the National Audit Office reports is still at risk. This House must be allowed to fulfil its responsibility to the public and scrutinise how such vast sums of public money have been spent. Will the Leader of the House consider arranging a debate on such issues?

Mark Spencer: I shall try not to be vague, which the hon. Gentleman has implied. To be absolutely clear, where fraud has taken place, it should be fully investigated. The Government will fully investigate any fraud that has taken place, and we will make every effort to recover those funds that were lost or that were, in effect, stolen by a fraudulent bid.

In the middle of a global pandemic, PPE supplies were very short globally. It was almost impossible to get supplies of masks, aprons and gloves, as the whole world was scrambling to get them, and at the time Members from across the House were suggesting that they could be sourced from all sorts of bizarre places, so I think it is a little bit tough to sit in the cold light of day and make judgments in hindsight of decisions made, and I think we should give the benefit of the doubt to those officials who were trying very hard to protect us.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the capacity and waiting times at accident and emergency departments? Every week since I was elected, I have been contacted by constituents who have waited for hours in our local A&E to be triaged and treated. The reasons for that are complex and multiple, and that is why I believe a debate in Government time is needed. We can all do our part to help, however. To do my bit, I am taking part in a sponsored abseil down the 154-foot tower of Southend University Hospital to support a cancer ward, and I would be delighted if my right hon. Friend wanted to join me.

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing to the attention of the House the gravity of the situation at Southend University Hospital. Indeed, it is for that reason that I am unable to join her in her noble pursuit to abseil down the tower; I fear it would add to the existing A&E pressures at the hospital. She raises an important matter on waiting times at A&E, and the Government are clear that long waits for admission are

not acceptable. The NHS is executing a range of actions across urgent primary and community care to better manage emergency care demand and capacity. Last year also saw a significant investment in the upgrade of A&E facilities, including building work to boost capacity and reduce overcrowding, funded by £450 million of investment.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): Coventry's time as city of culture will come to a close this May. It has encouraged thousands of young people to celebrate Coventry's rich heritage; a whole host of art installations have sprung up across our city from incredible local artists; and inclusive online concerts, films and other events have drawn in more than 260,000 people so far. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking all who have made this a truly wonderful experience? I encourage as many people as possible from across the House to come and visit Coventry this recess, as we are still celebrating our city of culture. Can we have Government time to discuss the importance of continuing this wonderful legacy?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is a walking advert for Coventry and all that is great about it, and I commend her for drawing the attention of the House to all that Coventry offers. I know that being a city of culture brings huge benefit to the tourism industry. A number of towns are bidding to be the next one, and the winner will be announced very soon. I join her in encouraging people from across the country to consider Coventry as a destination this Easter.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Across Keighley and Ilkley, we are being inundated with new housing development, and many new housing applications are being made. That is not being helped by Bradford Council's draft local plan, which will add another 3,000 new homes in my local community. I think of pressures in Long Lee and in Silsden, where our district councillor, Councillor Rebecca Whitaker, is doing a fantastic job of fighting a local planning application that is having a huge impact on local infrastructure in our schools and GP surgeries. Can we have a debate in Government time to explore how we can give local key service providers, particularly our schools and our NHS—our GP surgeries—more say in and influence over housing policy and planning applications?

Mark Spencer: Along with Rebecca Whitaker, my hon. Friend is a huge advocate for Keighley and on the challenges of green belt development. It is vital that the Government and local authorities get the balance right between supplying enough homes for the next generation to move into and protecting our green spaces. I am sure it is something that is worthy of further debate, and I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for an Adjournment debate to make sure he has another opportunity to highlight the challenges in his area.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Energy prices are going to skyrocket overnight, so today is meter reading day. Martin Lewis and Which? have both been encouraging people to submit meter readings today. It turns out that the websites of E.ON, EDF, Scottish Power, Shell, British Gas, SSE, Octopus Energy, Sainsbury's Energy and Bulb are crumbling under the pressure of trying to deal with all these meter reading submissions.

[Kirsty Blackman]

Will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging people who cannot submit their meter readings today to ensure they have an accurate record of their meter reading by taking a photo of it or attempting to email it to their provider, so that when the prices go up tomorrow, they are charged the correct rate up until today?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady should be commended for what is a very good idea. I support her suggestion and I think it is worthy of publicity. I encourage all Members from across the House to highlight it on their social media platforms, and I encourage people in those circumstances to do as she suggests. I think it is a very good idea, and she should be commended for it.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): Last week, I had a very moving meeting with Mark and Tom Pegram, father and brother to Sam Pegram, the humanitarian who was lost in the 737 Max air crash, Ethiopian Airlines flight ET 302, in March 2019. Their grief is understandable and still raw, but unfortunately it is being compounded by the delay in the UK coroner's inquest process because the Ethiopian authorities have yet to publish the air crash investigation report. Will the Leader of the House work with his colleagues in Government to give any assistance needed to the Ethiopian authorities to get that report published forthwith, so that Mark and Tom, and other British families, can get the closure of a coroner's inquest?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that, and I offer my sincere condolences to the families of Sam Pegram and the eight other British nationals who died on board flight ET 302. I appreciate that this continues to be a difficult time, following the third anniversary, as families still await answers over what happened on that day. The Government cannot interfere in the legal matters of another country, but I understand that the families are pursuing this matter through their local lawyer, who will be best placed to advise them. I thank my hon. Friend for drawing this matter to the attention of the House, and I shall write to the Foreign Secretary on her behalf.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Peter Hebblethwaite shows no sign of resigning, despite admitting to Select Committees that he flagrantly broke the law. I know that the Secretary of State for Transport has written to the Insolvency Service seeking the disqualification of Mr Hebblethwaite as a company director, but will the Government consider holding a debate on what further action might be appropriate for company directors who behave with such disregard for workers, and whether we need to set in train other legal routes to ensure that no company director ever behaves in such a way again?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is right to highlight Peter Hebblethwaite's actions, and she joins the Secretary of State for Transport in calling for him to go. The way in which he has treated his staff and the employees of P&O is outrageous and, frankly, abhorrent. I think the topic is worthy of debate, and I am sure that the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee would

give due consideration to that, given the number of Members from across the House who have an interest in debating it further.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the news that six NHS hospitals are set to trial pheasant, partridge and venison on their menus is extremely welcome, and will he join me in congratulating British Game Assurance on its work to help to make that possible? Can we have a debate on the value of game as healthy, nutritious, flavoursome and sustainable meat that more parts of the public sector should seek to procure for menus in schools, hospitals and beyond?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing the House's attention to that fact. British game is, as he says, nutritious and of good value. It also has a very high welfare background, in that all the animals that reach the food chain are wild animals that lived in the natural environment. He is right to draw the House's attention to the fact that game is now available in our NHS.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I regret to inform the Leader of the House that I have spent four months trying to get answers to two questions from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I have been asking why the Government insist on using out-of-date population figures to determine housing targets when the targets for St Albans would halve, and those for many other areas of Hertfordshire would be reduced, if up-to-date housing figures were used. On the green belt, I have asked the Government why they have not acted on the statement from the planning inspector that he cannot give any weight to the protection of the green belt because there are no green belt protections in the national planning policy framework. I have held a Westminster Hall debate, I have written to the Government a number of times and I have tabled several written parliamentary questions, but the Government continue to sidestep the issue. Can he give me some advice on how I can get answers to those questions, and will he consider a debate in Government time on how we can make sure up-to-date figures are used and put some green belt protections into the planning framework?

Mark Spencer: I should make it clear that Departments have a responsibility to respond in a timely manner to questions from MPs. I will assist the hon. Lady in pursuing the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to get answers to her questions and write on her behalf to the Secretary of State.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): As we recover from the pandemic, rail services, particularly in north Wales, need to be scaled back up. Transport for Wales services remain less frequent than usual, while direct Avanti West Coast services to London Euston are running just twice per day. That is set to increase to four from May, but it is well below the six per day that there were before the pandemic. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the need for services not only to return to normal, but to exceed that in north Wales, to help drive investment in the regional network?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to draw the House's attention to this matter. These challenges are best served by cross-border co-operation. This subject is worthy of further debate, and I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate at his earliest convenience so that he can highlight the challenges his constituents are facing and draw the House's attention to where cross-border co-operation will assist and solve those challenges.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): For more than 100 years, Shepherd's Bush market has served the people of west London and beyond. For most of that time, the Horada family have been one of its leading traders. Yesterday, James Horada stepped down as chair of the Shepherd's Bush Market Tenants Association, after 16 years in which he faced down repeated attempts by developers to destroy the market, winning a public inquiry and finally persuading the Lord Chief Justice and the Court of Appeal to save this unique institution. I am sure that the Leader of the House will wish to join me in congratulating James and his able successor, the vice-chair Peter Wheeler. Will he also find time for a debate on how we can ensure the future of our historic markets, many of which are, sadly, under threat?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the benefit of markets up and down the country; they benefit communities and are a rich resource for those communities to be able to access. I join him in praising James Horada for the work he has done over 16 years—that is a huge innings, and he should be praised for that. I wish him well in his retirement and hope that Peter Wheeler will continue the great work and that that market will remain as a community asset for many people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): On 29 March 2021, I joined the Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice outside St Thomas' Hospital in my constituency, where it started its campaign to paint hearts on the walls. I met Fran Hall, whose husband Steve Mead sadly died in October 2020, just three weeks after they were married. This Tuesday marked the first anniversary of that wall, and I want to pay tribute, as I hope the Leader of the House will also do, to the many families and volunteers who have continued to maintain it over the year, taking time to repaint those hearts, which mean so much to people and are a remembrance of the family members they have lost. Those hearts represent constituents from all over the country and the family we have lost. Will the Leader of the House guarantee Government time for us to debate how we can make this wall permanent?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. No one could be unmoved by seeing the tributes just across the river at the wall of hearts, and this is worthy of further consideration. In my constituency, I was able to attend the unveiling of a small memorial at Gedling crematorium to the people of Gedling and Nottingham who had lost their lives to covid. As a society, we should not forget the huge losses that we have experienced, and she is right to draw the House's attention to this. I will make sure I write to the relevant Ministers and pass on her comments.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): One of the most regular causes of complaints that I receive is the failure of services that have been outsourced to

private companies, including Capita, which now administers the Royal Mail pension scheme; it seems to do that very badly, if the case of my constituent whose pension should have been paid from September 2021 but still has not been is anything to go by. So may we have a debate in Government time about how the Government are supposed to hold these contractors to account, particularly when the systems are patently not working?

Mark Spencer: If the hon. Lady writes to me with the specific details about her constituent, I will make sure—*[Interruption.]* She says from a sedentary position that she already has. I will make sure that she gets a rapid response. I understand the stress that people undergo when they are concerned about whether they will get their pension, which they have rightly paid into. I will make sure that she gets a speedy answer.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House grant time for us to have a debate about the delivery of not only housing but infrastructure, and the timeliness of that delivery? I am sure that in his constituency, as in the constituencies of Members from across the House—we heard about this from the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore)—there is a real problem in this area. In my constituency, we were promised sustainable communities, but what we have is housing with no pedestrian access or egress off estates, no buses serving those estates, insufficient spaces at the local GPs and no spaces in our schools. So will the Leader of the House grant us time for a very welcome debate on this issue?

Mark Spencer: I am sure that such a debate would be a popular one. I am aware that a Westminster Hall debate was held earlier this week—I believe it was on Tuesday—about the provision of GP services connected to new developments. Local authorities have a huge responsibility to make sure that when they grant planning permission for new housing developments the infrastructure is put in place. Not only must there be doctors' surgeries and dentists, but they must make sure that the schools and road networks are adequate to provide support to those new housing developments. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to apply for either a Backbench Business debate or an Adjournment debate, where he can continue to highlight those challenges.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): You are warmly welcome to attend the Putney boat race this weekend, Madam Deputy Speaker. In Putney, we are delighted that it is returning after two years. It will be going underneath Hammersmith bridge, which has been closed to vehicles since April 2019, causing chaos, pollution and disruption across south-west London; it is a national transport route. Will the Leader of the House find Government time for a debate on funding the restoration of Hammersmith bridge? Hammersmith and Fulham Council has done a lot, and small funding has been provided for stabilisation works, but no funding for the full restoration so that vehicles can go back across the bridge. May we have time for a debate on this subject?

Mark Spencer: I wish everyone who is participating in the Putney boat race this weekend well. I encourage the hon. Lady to continue to highlight the challenges of Hammersmith bridge and put pressure both on Hammersmith's council and the Mayor of London to

[Mark Spencer]

try to help resolve these challenges, and to make sure that the situation her constituents find themselves in is resolved as soon as possible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Algeria, 16 churches have been forced to shut down and a further eight have had legal proceedings started against them in efforts to have them closed. The Leader of the House always responds, but will he arrange for a statement on what assessment Her Majesty's Government have made of this trend? Will he make representations to counterparts through the office of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in Algeria about protecting the freedom of religion or belief of minority groups in that country, where the situation is very worrying?

Mark Spencer: I am sorry to hear about the situation in Algeria and that those from minority religions there are feeling oppressed and disenfranchised. I will make sure that the Foreign Office is aware of the matters the hon. Gentleman has raised today. He continues to be an advocate for religious freedom around the world on a weekly basis.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): May we have a debate on the dedication of volunteers to local housing associations? My constituent Charlotte Levy, the former chair of Thenue Housing, passed away recently, having dedicated more than 60 years of her life to serving the voluntary groups and committees, particularly in the Calton, where she lived. Does the Leader of the House agree that we all need more selfless community-minded activists like Charlotte?

Mark Spencer: I join the hon. Lady in not only congratulating Charlotte but highlighting the great work that housing associations do up and down this country. They are a great resource for not only advice but support for tenants and residents throughout the country. The hon. Lady is right to highlight that and I join her in congratulating her constituent.

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

Points of Order

1.9 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Two years ago, the Home Secretary met me, the Mayor of Greater Manchester and the deputy mayor for policing and undertook to deport those members of the Rochdale grooming gang who were not British nationals. For two years, I have been trying to get an update. I raised the issue on the Floor of the House in Home Office questions in November, and the Home Secretary indicated to a junior Minister that she would meet me. Having had no meeting, I raised the issue again in Home Office questions in February, and the Home Secretary again undertook to meet me. I have now had a response from the Home Secretary's office to say that she is too busy and to ask me to meet a junior Minister.

I am not asking you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to say whether the Home Secretary is embarrassed, as I am sure she is, about her failure to deliver, or whether she is sufficiently in charge of her Department, which she is clearly not—those are not questions for you—but there is a real issue if any Government Minister gives an undertaking to any hon. Member that they will meet but then ultimately refuses that meeting. That is not accountability, which is what Parliament is about. How can you help me, Madam Deputy Speaker, in my pursuit of a real answer to the needs of the women who are the victims of child abusers?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for giving me notice of it. It is absolutely right to say that if a particular Minister commits personally to meeting a Member, that Minister should deliver on that commitment. It certainly sounds as though in this case the hon. Gentleman has been kept waiting for too long for the meeting that was promised. I hope that those on the Treasury Bench will act on this exchange and make sure that the hon. Gentleman is offered a meeting with the Home Secretary very soon.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In his opening speech in Tuesday's Opposition day debate, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General implied to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) that the Government could ignore the motion simply because it was proposed by the Opposition. That motion was unanimously agreed as a resolution of this House, so can you confirm from the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, that, contrary to the Minister's suggestion, a motion on a Humble Address is binding and that the Government would be in contempt of this House to refuse to comply with the motion?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for notice of it. As the House has agreed a Humble Address—an effective motion—that should be complied with. In other words, the Government should provide the documents that were demanded. Resolutions of this House have equal force whichever Member moves the original motion. If the only effective motions were ones moved by members of Her Majesty's Government, Parliament would simply be, in effect, a rubber-stamping exercise and we might as well all go home. I reiterate that such motions should be complied

with. I would not want to speculate at this point about whether or not the Government intend to comply—that would be hypothetical—but I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what has been said.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you help us? What is the purpose of having named day questions if one Department—the Department of Health and Social Care—consistently does not comply with the requirement to reply to those questions in a timely fashion, to which the Leader of the House referred earlier? The most recent records show that only one third of the named day questions to that Department are answered on time. I have 12 outstanding named day questions to that Department that have not yet been answered, some of which date back more than five weeks, and we are now on the last day before the recess. What can be done to enforce the rules, particularly against the Department of Health and Social Care? Many of the questions are highly pertinent to people who want information about whether or not it is safe to take the covid-19 vaccine.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. He raises an important issue that the Procedure Committee has looked at, and he might like to draw it to that Committee's attention. He is quite right to say that the Leader of the House has indicated that Departments should answer questions in a timely fashion. We have just had business questions; it may be that the hon. Gentleman would like to raise the issue at a future session of business questions when the Leader of the House is present.

Sir Christopher Chope: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have raised the issue before—in fact, Mr Speaker granted an urgent question on it and the Minister for Health had to come and answer it—but despite all the pleas from you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and Mr Speaker in the Chair, the Department does not seem to be responding. I am a member of the Procedure Committee and the statistics to which I referred are the latest statistics reported to that Committee. The question I ask is: what can be done to enforce the rules?

Madam Deputy Speaker: All I can say is that we have to persist, which the hon. Gentleman is clearly doing. He is not alone in his concern about this matter, as he has rightly said. I will ensure that Mr Speaker is aware of this comments. As I said, he might, as a member of the Procedure Committee, like to take the issue back to that Committee as well.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will no doubt be aware that journalists often call the day before a recess the “taking out the trash day”. This morning, we found out that the Government have announced a new policy and consultation, not on trash but on sewage and river pollution. They have not come to the House and, as far as I am aware, they are not making a statement, which means they get to avoid parliamentary scrutiny of the matter for weeks.

A plan to deal with sewage is critical: water companies have admitted to discharging raw sewage into our rivers and estuaries more than 372,000 times in the past year.

It has happened for 1,000 hours in Whitney, just upstream from my constituency, and for 100 hours in Botley and North Hinksey—and that is in my patch alone. I know the issue worries Members from all parties, so are you aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, of any statement that might come today? If there will not be one, how can we encourage the Government to come to the House and answer questions?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. As she says, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has today published a consultation that is open until Thursday 12 May. Mr Speaker has not had an application from the Department to make an oral statement today.

I say again that the Leader of the House was present for business questions; it would have been very appropriate for the hon. Lady to raise the issue then so that she had direct access to the Leader of the House. I advise her that that would be a good way to draw attention to the point she made. Having said that, those on the Treasury Bench will have heard her. I urge Members who wish to raise points of order after business questions to remember that they have the chance to raise issues directly with the Leader of the House during business questions.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. When the Government announced an end to free lateral flow tests, the Prime Minister said:

“We don't need to keep spending at a rate of £2 billion a month, which is what we were doing in January.”

The public could be forgiven for getting the impression that the tests were costing £2 billion every month, but commentators were quick to highlight that the figure for January was probably inflated because of the requirement for people to have two negative lateral flow tests before they could leave self-isolation.

To get to the bottom of how much lateral flow tests were actually costing, I tabled two written questions to the Government to ask for the total amount that lateral flow tests were costing on a monthly basis and over a 12-month period. The Government answered, but refused to give me the data, claiming it was “commercially sensitive”.

It is outrageous that the public are being kept in the dark as to how much lateral flow tests have actually cost the public purse over the past year. I would like the Government to come clean and publish the figures. What is your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how I might persuade or compel the Government to disclose to Members the figures for how much the tests have cost over the past 12 months?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. This is perhaps something that she has already raised, or will in the future, during any statements or urgent questions on the issue. She might like to go to the Table Office to see whether there are other routes that she could pursue. I am not sure whether she was indicating that confusing advice had been given to the House, or that it had not got any advice at all. If it is not getting any advice at all, she might like to go to the Table Office to ask whether there are other ways in which she might like to get this information. She might like to see whether any members

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

of the Health and Social Care Committee or the Public Accounts Committee would be interested in looking into this. Again, I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard her comments and will take back to Ministers her concern that this information is not forthcoming.

Backbench Business

Long Covid: Impact on the Workforce

1.21 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of long covid on the UK workforce.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us to hold this updated debate on long covid. I also thank my co-sponsors, some of whom, I am sad to say, are at home ill with covid and very much wanted to be here today. Also the fact that the debate has moved weeks has not helped. For those watching at home, I have been contacted by several Members who are very sorry that they are not able to be here. I also want to put on record my thanks to the many hundreds of people who, over the years, have contacted the all-party group on coronavirus with their personal stories, many of which are very heart warming, but also moving and worrying because it is a debilitating condition. What I say to all of them is: “We hear you, you have not been forgotten and we will continue to fight for you.”

I want to recognise the actions that the Government have taken so far. I was pleased that, after the first debate we had on the issue in January 2021, the Government made some £18.5 million available for research into long covid, including treatment, and delivered even more funding in the summer, which is incredibly welcome. In that debate, I also welcomed the new dedicated long covid clinics and the publishing of guidance to medical professionals by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network and the Royal College of General Practitioners. However, despite that welcome action, it has felt, over the past eight months, that long covid has totally dropped off the radar and, on this issue, there has been very little debate.

I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for coming to the Chamber to answer this debate. I believe that it is the first time that the Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy has answered in the Chamber on this. I will focus my remarks on the effect that long covid has had on the workforce because our belief is that this is a looming crisis that we need to think ahead about and that it would be wrong for us just to focus on the medical side—there are broader implications here.

Although there are many understandable reasons why this matter may have dropped off the radar, including the cost of living crisis and the war in Ukraine, I argue that these things are very much linked. How are we going to have a strong and productive economy if large swathes of our workforce are struggling to do the jobs that they are meant to be doing? How can we help them to recover?

Over this past year, we have had more information and learned more about long covid, although it is worth saying that there is still no cure. There are treatment plans that can help with symptoms, but the past year has been awful for many, including Andrew, a headteacher whom I spoke about in the debate a year ago, who

received multiple written warnings about his inability to do the job in the day. I went back to him and asked how he was. He said:

“I made the difficult decision to resign from my post as a headteacher, so my limited energies could focus on coming to terms with my illness rather than continuing to face dismissal from a career that I had committed the past 25 years to and one that I dearly love.”

I also got an email from Nell, one of my constituents, who is a doctor. She said:

“I adore being a hospital doctor. I love my patients and I trained for years to do this. It’s been nearly two years of struggling with my health after covid, and while I continue to slowly recover, I don’t know if I can do this much longer. I’m so very sorry—I feel that I have let you down writing this.”

To Nell, I say that I do not believe that she has let anyone down, but I think that, to an extent, the Government have let her down.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and for her excellent speech. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate. She has raised a couple of cases that she has heard about. I have been in touch a lot with Sam, a carer in my constituency. At the very beginning when she had long covid, people did not understand the condition and it was not taken seriously, and it has affected her ability to work ever since. Does the hon. Member agree that, as well as dealing with the health side and getting more research on how the condition affects people so differently, it is important to have guidance for employers—she will probably come on to this—on how to deal with this and how to support those who may have long covid through that very difficult period? As we do not know how long the condition lasts, we need a proper long-term strategy for those who are affected and for their families.

Layla Moran: The hon. Member hits the nail on the head. People can recover, and very often do, but the way to help them do that is very badly explained to employers right now. Indeed, I will come on to talk in some detail about that.

Many people were told, especially at the beginning, that long covid was something that they were making up. They were told that it was all in their head. I have a research paper here that shows that scans have been done on people’s chests and the reason they were suffering from breathlessness was that the tissue was fundamentally damaged. This is very much a real disease, which now needs a real response.

It is not just public sector workers who have dealt with this. I spoke to Rebecca, who gave evidence to the all-party parliamentary group. She was a fitness instructor, Madam Deputy Speaker. You would think that a fitness instructor would be very healthy and would have very good lungs—before the pandemic, anyway. She used to teach 14 high-intensity classes a week and ran her own business. Now long covid means that she is in bed 60% of the time and describes being

“unable to return to work, and to be the mum, wife or friend I once was”.

It is utterly heartbreaking. We now need to accept that, if we are going to live with covid, we also have to live with long covid. In the evidence sessions that the APPG took in December and January, we heard how the condition is still severely impacting the lives and livelihoods

of people across the country. They described how the condition has left them unable to work, sometimes unable to move, forcing them into long periods of absence from work, dipping into their savings and doing anything to stay afloat—something that is much more difficult now with the cost of living crisis.

A study released this month by Queen Mary University concluded that becoming infected with covid increases the risk of economic hardship, especially if the individual develops long covid. Those individuals describe a patchwork of uneven availability when it comes to long covid clinics and many are desperate for treatment. We heard from one nurse, for example, who has spent thousands of pounds going to Germany to get treatment that she is not able to access here. Public sector workers gave their lives for us. When we were all allowed to be at home, they went in, and they are the ones, according to Office for National Statistics surveys, who have the highest prevalence of long covid. I believe that we owe them so much more than they have had so far.

Unsurprisingly, though, it is not just about public services. We have 1.4 million people across the country experiencing self-reported long covid symptoms. That is 2.4% of the population and that cuts across every single sector, not just the public sector.

In the hospitality sector, which, as the Minister will know, is already struggling, 2.6% of workers have long covid. If we take the 3 million workforce estimate from UKHospitality, that equates to 70,000 workers unable to do their jobs as they did before. In retail, it is 2.3%, which equates to just under 70,000 workers; for personal service, such as beauticians, it is a bit less at 6,000, but still 2.1%. Those are big numbers in sectors that are already struggling post pandemic and struggling with workers’ visas following Brexit. They do not need this.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady and her colleagues on securing this important debate. Does she agree that it is not only the people who have had long covid who suffer, but their family members who have to care for them? My constituent Julie Wells has had a working life of nearly 40 years. Her teenage daughter, on a second dose of covid, has been left with totally debilitating symptoms and now needs constant care. Julie hopes at best to get back to part-time work, but she may not. That is a full-time person lost to the workforce because of caring for a family member.

Layla Moran: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. The caring responsibilities are greatly increased, as is the prevalence in children. I was alerted by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) to a case of a parent who is asking for dispensation for her child from taking examinations because she has missed so many days of school. I am talking to the Education Secretary separately about that point, but long covid affects the entire family, not just the workforce.

Some 1.5 million people have long covid, but 989,000 people say that those long covid symptoms adversely affect their day-to-day activities and 281,000 people report that their ability to undertake their day-to-day activities had been “limited a lot”. That often means they must take part-time instead of full-time work, and sadly it often means they are unable to recover well because they are pushed to try to get back to work.

[Layla Moran]

The effect on business is now being better documented. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that a quarter of UK employers cited long covid as one of the main causes of long-term sickness absence among their staff. For small businesses, the effects can be devastating. The Federation of Small Businesses has shared guidance on how to help with statutory sick pay and arranging for temporary staff cover.

However, I am concerned that the ACAS guidance right now is pretty sparse; I hope the Minister might take that up. The guidance signposts to other websites but does not make it clear that one of the most important things to do with long covid is often to let someone rest. People say “listen to your body” when it comes to medical things; I am afraid that with long covid that is actually the treatment plan.

If someone is forced or encouraged into work by their employer—often inadvertently, if they do not have proper guidance—it can set them back and cause even more problems down the line. One of our main calls is for employer guidance, but I also urge the Government to look at the ACAS website, for example, and ensure that it is clear to employers how they can help and support their employees to stay at home and rest as long as they need to, so that they come back and we do not unnecessarily lose people from the workforce.

A legal expert speaking to the APPG described the lack of access to financial support and said,

“lots of people with Long Covid find themselves starting for the very first time to be involved in the obstacle course which is our benefit system”.

It is clear that long covid is having a serious impact on the ability of our workforce to do their jobs, and we can only expect that to get worse as the virus spreads through the population again and we get more cases of long covid.

What can we do? The all-party group has released a report on long covid this week; if the Minister has not seen it, I would be happy to give him a copy. In it, we make 10 recommendations, but I will highlight just a few. First, the Government need urgently to prioritise research treatments for long covid patients. We welcome the money already committed, but we would contrast it with the United States, for example, where \$1 billion has been earmarked for this, because the US recognises the effect long covid could have on its economy and sees this as an investment. I urge the UK Government to find similar ambition.

Secondly, we call for employer guidelines, set out by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in conjunction with the Department of Health and Social Care, to help all businesses to help their employees back into work. Thirdly, we call for the UK Government to launch a compensation scheme for all those frontline workers currently living with long covid, similar to the armed forces compensation scheme.

The Minister will perhaps be aware that the process for the designation of an occupational disease is ongoing; we are hopeful that that will report back soon, and we are discussing that with the Department for Work and Pensions. That designation could be game-changing, particularly in those public sector areas where prevalence was incredibly high, such as education, the health and

social care workforce and public transport, which had some of the highest prevalences of covid, particularly at the beginning.

The Office for National Statistics survey points to where we need to look. However, I urge the Government not to wait for that designation. Many of those workers, as in my examples, have already left the professions. They are leaving the sector or deciding to take early retirement, and this is a time when our economy needs a boost. It needs those experienced workers. At the moment, we are not paying any attention to that.

The main reason we secured this debate was to urge the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to look ahead and take this seriously. The best thing we can do right now is to help hard-pressed people in the UK in our fight against Putin, against the cost of living crisis and all the rest. If we are to get our economy back on its feet, we must get our workers back at their desks. If those workers have long covid, there is currently very little out there to support them or those businesses that desperately want them back.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I think we can get everybody in with a reasonable amount of time, if everyone limits their comments to a maximum of eight minutes.

1.36 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Forewarned is forearmed, as they say, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). I congratulate her not only on securing this debate, but on her leadership of the APPG, which she chairs exceptionally well. Today's debate and the report that underpins it reflect that. I also thank all those who have provided evidence to the APPG, particularly on the latest report. Their stories are moving and quite shocking. In addition, I thank the secretariat, who do a fantastic job of providing support to the group.

This Covid pandemic is far from over. I am wearing my mask, and we know we have an outbreak in Parliament, with a number of MPs currently off with covid. It is far from over. We are seeing case numbers ticking upwards, hospitalisations also on the rise and, sadly, increased deaths. Once again, we have seen the burden of disease from this pandemic hitting the most deprived. Avoidable mortality is six times greater for women in deprived areas compared with the least deprived women and nearly five times greater for men. Yet we see a spring statement where the Government's “levelling up” rhetoric has no substance. Just £1 out of the £6 from the Chancellor's tax hike in the autumn was given back, but only 30p from that £1 went to those on the lowest incomes.

Despite the Government's hype, their pandemic preparedness was woeful and their pandemic management in too many aspects was reckless, wasteful and even unlawful. We are now aware that, although many people may have fully recovered from the acute phase of covid infection, as the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon has said, for a significant number—ONS data estimates more than 1.5 million or 2.5% of the population, although the covid tracker identifies a larger percentage—there is a longer chronic phase. That chronic phase affects children, about 34,000 at the moment, women, particularly younger

women of working age, people on low incomes, frontline workers who are more at risk of exposure, including NHS and care workers, and those with an existing activity-limiting health condition or disability.

As we have heard, symptoms vary but, in summary, they include fatigue, pain, reduced muscle strength, brain fog and so on. In my own case, I have experienced prolonged fatigue bordering on exhaustion, being awake but my brain being somehow disengaged from what I am doing and nasty bouts of nausea. I believe that covid has also exacerbated my already severe arthritis, which is partly the result of many years of running, but has got considerably worse with long covid. The pain is constant and sometimes completely debilitating, making it difficult to stand up.

What is shocking is the response to people who are experiencing long covid from their employers. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon mentioned some of these cases. I have also heard of those who have been disciplined by their employers. They were struggling with this condition and wanted to go about their everyday lives. They wanted to be at work and yet they were disciplined for not being able to be back at their desks, to be back in front of their class, or to see patients; we heard from a GP, as Members may remember. This very much reflects, unfortunately, the attitude of some, but it was particularly disappointing in public sector organisations, especially the NHS.

In December 2020, the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence brought forward its guidelines on managing long covid. At the time, I commended it on the holistic healthcare approach taken when assessing a patient with symptoms beyond four and 12 weeks, with the emphasis on empathy and acknowledging the impact the symptoms may have on the patient's day-to-day life, including their ability to work. This was a major step forward from previous NICE guidelines on other chronic fatigue syndrome illnesses that are similar to long covid but also affect the nervous and immune systems. The NICE guidelines on long covid were updated earlier this month, and I note that they are to be regularly updated, which we recommended, because there is emerging evidence that we must make sure is incorporated at the earliest opportunity. I hope, because I have not seen evidence of this, that investigations into the range of immune responses to covid as well as immune therapies will also be incorporated.

As I mentioned last year, the British Society for Immunology and several others have suggested that in addition to long-term damage to multiple organs, the pain, muscle weakness, fatigue and even brain fog often associated with long covid may be due to inflammatory issues associated with our immune response rather than covid itself. Covid-19, like other viruses, attacks multiple systems—respiratory, cardiovascular, nervous and gastrointestinal—as it attaches to epithelial cells that are distributed throughout the body. Our bodies' ability to fight the virus depends on our immune systems reacting appropriately and not overreacting.

We need adequate long-term funding for long covid clinics providing evidence-based therapies—evidence is the key. I pay tribute to my colleagues in Oldham for helping over 300 long covid patients. We need to ensure that long covid is recognised as an occupational disease. There has to be a societal approach.

1.42 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): A couple of weeks ago, I attended with constituents the service at St Paul's Cathedral that was organised by the cathedral, Sir Lloyd Dorfman and others to remember those who have died from coronavirus. Indeed, earlier today in business questions we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) about the very striking memorial wall in her constituency along the banks of the Thames by St Thomas's Hospital.

I am really grateful to the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for enabling us to remind ourselves of all the other victims of covid who are, in a sense, the lucky ones who have survived but who still need our attention. I declare an interest in that a member of my immediate family suffers from long covid. If the House will bear with me, I will not actually identify who it is. For 18 months, that member of my family has not really been able to get out of bed. In terms of work, they were doing well. They are young. Their career was progressing. They were being extremely well rated at work. Almost overnight, that came to a crashing halt.

At first, when you suffer from covid, as I did at the same time as my family member, you hope and believe that although it is going to be awful and unpleasant, if you get through it, life will carry on. Then long covid starts to emerge and you do not get any better. I got better and my family member did not. It involved all the symptoms that my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) described—huge tiredness, brain fog and aching limbs. At the time, the best source of advice that was available, and the best source of support, was my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). There was nothing really available. People had not come to terms with the condition and with identifying what its causes were. I pay tribute to and thank him for his work and his support to my family.

The employers of my family member were excellent, and still are. They have not been able to continue paying, but as far as they are concerned my family member is still on their books. They value the contribution that my family member has made—again, I am sorry to talk vaguely but I do not want to identify the person—and have said, “When you're ready to come back, we're ready to have you.” That is the kind of employment practice that we are looking for.

To echo my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), another member of my family has had to give up their job in order to be the carer. What we are looking for is some kind of hope—something to cling on to and to demonstrate progress. There has been progress. I welcome the Government's investment of £18 million and the growing recognition of the post-viral chronic fatigue syndrome caused by coronavirus. Whenever there is a new light on this, even in scientific papers that I would not normally understand, we devour them to try to find an explanation, a cause, a hope of a cure or a treatment that will get us and my family member through this. Is it caused by scarring on the lungs? Is it caused by microclots? Is it caused by activating postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, which also bears some kind of relation to what is going on? The truth is that it could be any one of those in any number of individuals, but the absolute fatigue is the same.

[Christian Matheson]

I remember my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish advising me, “If you’re feeling good, don’t do too much—don’t exert yourself.” I passed that advice on. It is also about the mental effect. When you are having a good day, you do not want to exert yourself because then you might be knocked out for the next three days, so that forces you to withdraw into yourself and not want to go out. You cannot even walk down to the shops or to the park because you are so terrified that you might then not make it through the next three days. It is about the hope and desire and almost desperation that when you have a good day and it is followed by another good day and then perhaps another, is this the beginning of the end, or even the end of the beginning? For so many, including my family member, it has not been that.

I would ask for the same consideration that has been given to my family member to be given to others—for employers to recognise that the Government have recognised this as an issue and the medical establishment has recognised it as an issue. Employers need to treat their employees who have this illness as also being victims of the pandemic, because nobody has chosen to have it. My message to those, including constituents, who still persist in saying that covid-19 is nothing—that it is just like a cold or the flu—would be something along the lines of, “Get stuffed.” There are 140,000 names on the wall outside St Thomas’s, and there are maybe a couple of hundred thousand others who are still suffering today and are desperate to get over this terrible long-term affliction and have some hope of a better life to come. I am most grateful for this debate, and most grateful, again, to my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish for the support he has given to my family.

1.49 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for securing this important debate, and I must thank the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for bringing to life the reality of many of our constituents and what they experience day to day. No one wants to be in the position of experiencing long covid, the variety of symptoms that it presents with and its timescale. With people having experienced long covid symptoms since the very first wave, it is clearly a difficult and debilitating issue for the country to deal with.

A little over a month ago, I raised the issue of long covid and employment in an Adjournment debate answered by the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman). Although I was grateful for his responses then, I would like to raise some issues again—my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon has raised some of them—because there is very much more that we could be doing.

When I was here a few weeks ago, I quoted the Office for National Statistics figures, which said that in the four weeks to 2 January, 1.3 million people across the UK were suffering from long covid. That number is now estimated to be 1.5 million, and that is an incredibly fast uptick. Like others, I have recently had covid myself. I was in my bed for four days. Like the hon. Member for City of Chester said, I had a good day and I did too

much, and I ended up back in my bed again. Although thankfully for me it was mild and I seem to be very much back on my feet, there is no doubt that regardless of the strain or variant, long covid can still be the result. Even if symptoms are mild for many, the reality is that mild symptoms can still result in long covid. That number shows an incredibly fast uptick, and I stand with colleagues across the House when we say that clearly this condition will not go away, and the Government cannot close their eyes to it.

Indeed, this morning I met RESULTS UK to talk about work we have done on equitable covid access. There is no doubt that unless we do more to help developing countries and other parts of the world in managing this pandemic, we will see future variants, so the risk of long covid does not go away.

Scottish National party colleagues are always talking about Scotland’s doing a lot better compared with elsewhere, but I think the Scottish Government are letting down long covid sufferers in Scotland. As my friend the Member of the Scottish Parliament for Edinburgh West has shown, of the 119,000 long covid sufferers in Scotland, only 1,000 had been referred to the long covid support services announced by Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland by the end of February. A recent Freedom of Information request showed that of the much-needed £10 million long covid support fund announced by the Scottish Government last September, not a single penny has been allocated or spent. I am an absolute believer in devolving decision making to the place where it can be most effective for our constituents, but the Scottish Government are failing in delivering this support, whether through inefficiencies, errors or something else. My constituents in North East Fife and my SNP colleagues’ constituents deserve better, and I hope to see better in future.

Turning to the impact of long covid on the workforce, I want to focus specifically on those who would otherwise be working, but cannot as a result of their medical condition. I thank those Members who have already highlighted where employers are trying and helping people to work. We have to acknowledge, though, that there are employers out there not doing right by constituents and members of staff, and we must work hard to ensure that they do what is required.

I do not want to repeat my entire speech from a month ago, but I will turn back to a few key points that I do not feel were properly addressed then. Will the Government commit to extending the period that claimants for benefits have to complete their application forms? For someone with a debilitating condition, particularly relapsing remitting ones, which long covid often presents itself as, four weeks is just not enough time to complete a 30-page form, including the collection of evidence. Particularly when experiencing some of those symptoms, they simply cannot concentrate for the length of time required. It takes up more time and resources to apply for a two-week extension. As I raised in the last debate, why do we not just automatically apply that extension to give people more time, rather than taking up DWP time and resources, as well as those of the person, to request that extension? It would be a cheap and straightforward step to give enough time in the first place.

Will the Government commit to consulting with disabled people, including those with long covid or other relapsing remitting conditions, such as ME, about the design of those application forms to ensure that they are properly

able to explain the impact of their conditions? I appreciate that the Minister is from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but we have had a cross-Government approach to covid, and we need a cross-Government approach to long covid, too.

Will the Government accept that the evidence of doctors and specialists who truly understand complex conditions, such as long covid, is relevant to the assessment of how people's day-to-day lives are affected? Are they afraid that hard evidence will make it more difficult to minimise payments to those in need? Sometimes we are left to wonder just that.

Will the Government publish their decision making matrix for assessors and submit it to independent scrutiny to ensure that it allows for suitable decisions to be made relating to complex conditions such as long covid? That will also have the additional benefit of considerably increasing trust in DWP. We hear about that a lot in this Chamber, and we know it is incredibly low. Finally, will the Government provide proper training to staff in DWP centres—both front and back office—relating to assessments and work coaching? We want to ensure that they are equipped to work with claimants suffering from this new and complex condition. We have heard the variety of symptoms that it creates, but I am pretty sure that increasing people's anxiety and stress will do nothing to help them.

Those who cannot work because of a health condition are the other side of the workforce coin. Everyone must be supported, and those who are less visible must be given the support they require.

1.56 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for securing this debate, and I reiterate what has been said by many: we understand that so many people are suffering from long covid, and it must be taken seriously by the Government. We understand the impact it is having not only on those individuals and their daily lives, but the workforce. This economic issue will continue to have a serious impact, and it needs to be addressed. I reiterate the main ask that we have and that the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus has in its very helpful report on long covid, which is for employer guidelines so that people are not at the whim and the mercy of different employers regarding understanding and support for their continuing in or returning to the workforce.

I have come to this debate for two groups of people. One is all those suffering from long covid across the country—an estimated 1.5 million people, or 4.4% of the workforce. The other is those constituents who have been suffering from ME, who have learned many lessons from that and think they are relevant to working with those with long covid. They have been underestimated, not believed and not supported. When they have gone to their GP, they have been told the wrong advice—advice that makes their ME worse—and they have not been understood in schools, whether by young people or teachers, or by their employers, and they do not want anyone with long covid to go through the same. I have been disturbed to hear some of the evidence given to the APPG about workforce practices that are not conducive to helping people come back to the workforce and not the best for those individuals and our economy.

A couple of my constituents have written to me. One said:

"I have now had long covid for two years...We desperately need more investment in potential treatments. It is clear that the illness impacts the blood, autoimmune system, organs, brain and central nervous system. None of these mechanisms are being treated by the NHS so far. Treatments are being trialled in other countries."

There are questions being asked about the trials being conducted in other countries and what more could be done here.

Another constituent said:

"I contracted covid-19 at the very end of September. Like many people, I suffered mild symptoms...2 weeks on from my initial infection I was suddenly hit with a wave of long covid symptoms and was truly horrified at what was happening to my brain and body. I felt drained and broken, and...I felt as though a foreign body was inside my head—I could no longer hold even a conversation, yet alone work. For the last 7 months I have been unable to function in any sort of capacity."

Finally, my cousin has had long covid for a long time. He sent me a list of his symptoms: fatigue, concentration impairment, memory problems, cognitive loss, internal pain, chills and sweats, sleeplessness, sore throat, dizziness, shaking, anxiety, faintness and muscle aches. All these symptoms and impacts of long covid need to be understood by employers, by teachers and education settings, and by general practitioners and all medical workers, as recommended by the report of the APPG on coronavirus.

I underline those recommendations and ask specifically for the urgent production of clear employer guidelines, otherwise there will continue to be an employer lottery in the treatment of people with long covid as they return to work. I ask for guidance to education settings, because many students with ME found it difficult to get understanding in order to continue with their education. We cannot have the same happen for those with long covid. And I ask for clear guidance to medical practitioners on children and adults with long covid so that everyone gets the proper care, support and understanding they need so that they have hope and do not add being misunderstood to their long list of symptoms, only increasing their anxiety.

I welcome this debate, and I hope to hear some good news from the Minister about the key recommendations of this report being taken up to create a good situation for everyone with long covid.

2.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, which brings back many memories, as the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) said. There will be no one in the Chamber today who is not reflecting on those who have been lost over the past two years. As of last week, we have lost 3,200 people in Northern Ireland and 157,000 across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is fair to say that every family and every person has been touched by the loss of someone to covid. We cannot help but think of those numbers in this debate.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on setting the scene and on her hard work with others on the APPG to bring this matter to a head and to highlight and better understand these issues.

[Jim Shannon]

I was first elected as a councillor in 1985, and I sat in the Northern Ireland Assembly for 12 consecutive years. When I first became a Member of the Legislative Assembly in 1998, one of the biggest issues in my office was benefits, and it continues to be the biggest issue—benefits, housing and planning, in that order.

The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) talked about ME, and others will recognise this story. When I was an MLA, people with ME would come to me when they had to fill in benefits forms. They said, “My doctor says there is nothing wrong with me.” And I said, “Are there any other doctors in the practice you could speak to?” I am not disrespecting doctors, as they are excellent people, but there was no understanding of ME then. We had to fight incredible battles to get the evidence to prove these people had ME. They said they had chronic fatigue, and they did. It was called ME, and it was a disease. That supports what the hon. Lady, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon and others have said.

I am not saying anyone here is special, but I commend the hon. Member for City of Chester for his very personal story, which the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) also mentioned. His personal story resonates, and he knows that I missed him. I said to him, “We missed you. Where have you been?” He did not tell me everything he had been through, but he told me some of it—he told it all today. Others in the House have been affected, too, so we thank him for his story.

Although I have been double-jabbed and boosted, I was informed by a test after getting home from the House on an early Saturday morning that I had covid. I could not understand it, because I had no symptoms. A lady from the NHS back home phoned me on the Saturday morning and said, “Mr Shannon, how do you feel?” And I said, “Would you be shocked to know that I feel great?” She said, “Well, do you have any symptoms?” And I said, “I have no symptoms. As a matter of fact, I do not think I have felt this well in the past two weeks.” The lady could not understand it, and she told me that I was asymptomatic. I am not sure what that means—

Wendy Chamberlain: It means you are special.

Jim Shannon: My wife says I am special. I thank the hon. Lady for being most complimentary.

I did not have any symptoms, but I isolated as instructed, because I follow the rules—that is the way to do it. Although I was fortunate and blessed to be asymptomatic and not ill with covid, that is not the case for the many people who did not come through covid unscathed. We have all mentioned that 1.5 million people, 2.4% of the population of this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, have self-reported ongoing covid symptoms that have persisted for more than four weeks, as of 31 January 2022. Forty-five per cent. of them, 685,000 people, first had or suspect they first had covid-19 at least one year previously.

I think of the wall outside St Thomas’s Hospital, where some ladies from Manchester, Liverpool and elsewhere met us two or three months ago. I was walking to the hotel one night, many months ago, and passed the wall. It is a wonderful memorial to those who have

passed on, and it was good to have that event—the walk—last Tuesday that those ladies and others organised to give people an outlet for their feelings.

Two years after the first lockdown, the long-term effects of covid are becoming clear. We need to put protection in place for employees with this long-term illness that doctors cannot pinpoint. These people struggle daily to live with it, but they are not protected by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

This Government should urgently produce guidelines for employers in both the private sector and the public sector on managing the impact of long covid among their workforce. We should also launch a compensation scheme, as the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon mentioned, for all frontline key workers living with long covid. I agree with the APPG that the scheme should mirror the armed forces compensation scheme, which we discussed on Monday night, recognising the relapsing nature of long covid and going beyond the existing pay scheme.

Long covid is a debilitating illness. There is a gentleman I have known ever since he came to Ards. He is the pastor of a church in my constituency, and he almost lost his life to covid. He is 6 feet 4 inches, and this big, strapping man was brought to his knees. He walked up the hill to Stormont in the “Voice for the Voiceless” protest, and I thought he would have to lie down. Long covid has hit him incredibly hard. He has one day of good and then three days of bad. He has headaches, stomach upsets, blood clots, reduced lung function and chronic fatigue. His church is happy to allow him to rest as he needs. Had he worked for another employer—I will not mention them—he would not have that protection. We must improve the current care pathways for long covid, with a view to ensuring the healthcare system is capable of meeting current and future demand.

In a Westminster Hall debate, I mentioned a constituent who had brain fog. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), has lived that. It is important to say that one of our friends and colleagues in this House has lived with long covid and has found it incredibly difficult, as have others, to deal with. You are not far from our thoughts—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): He is not far.

Jim Shannon: Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am probably getting carried away in the emotion of the occasion.

Has the Minister’s Department been able to collect the data on those with long covid? I want to see flexibility for those who are in full-time employment and employment guidelines, to which the hon. Member for Putney referred. I think all hon. Members present want to see them.

Perhaps the Minister can confirm whether the lessons have been learned from covid-19. As the hon. Member for North East Fife said, other diseases will come along and we must be prepared. What we learn from this disease will make us smarter for the next one. I put on record, because it is important when we are talking about these things, how well the Government reacted with the compensation schemes for businesses and the covid-19 vaccine. Those are the positives that gave us heart when we were down in the dumps.

Roughly 4% of the UK's workforce has had long covid and 82 million work days were lost due to long covid absence in NHS England between March 2020 and September 2021. The real figure may be higher as it was not classified as a reason for absence at the start of the pandemic. It is clear that the effect on business is real, which is why we are having this debate, and that there must be structures in place to deal with it.

Again, I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon and all hon. Members for their contributions. I look forward to the contributions from the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish. The Minister is a friend to us all and I look forward to hearing what he says.

2.11 pm

Marion Fellows: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and the hon. Members who have already spoken in the debate.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) talked about staff being disciplined because they have long covid. The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) gave a personal testimony and explained much more about how it affects families in their entirety. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) talked about application forms, which are the bane of all our existence. If someone is not well, they become far more difficult. The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) raised the idea of employer guidelines. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave his unique take on it, mentioned his wife and family, and brought a personal touch to the debate.

The scale of long covid cannot be underestimated, as we have heard, and has a significant impact on the UK workforce, especially key workers. The ONS's latest monthly estimates show that over the four-week period ending 31 January, an estimated 1.5 million people across the UK—2.4% of the population—self-reported experiencing long covid. That included 119,000 folk in Scotland.

That data shows that long covid symptoms that persist for longer than four weeks appear to have a higher prevalence in adults between the ages of 35 and 49. A survey last month by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, which has already been referred to, found that a quarter of UK employers cited long covid as one of the main causes of long-term sickness absence among staff. These are things that we are having to deal with. Key workers appear to be more at risk of long covid, which must be looked at.

We are still learning about the true impact of long covid on an individual's physical and mental health. We know what the most common symptoms are, but we still do not understand the long-term issues. The CIPD report points out that, as it is a new condition, people sometimes do not know that they have it and it takes a long time for them to be given a diagnosis. There is a double burden of uncertainty regarding how best people with long covid can navigate their work, which affects sickness absence and their return to work.

Wendy Chamberlain: Briefly, on that point, the fact that first wavers with long covid did not necessarily have a covid test is a key issue. The Department for

Work and Pensions and the Government should look at that. When GPs are looking at a list of symptoms that can only be long covid, there should be an acceptance that that is what people are suffering from.

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Lady for the intervention. Hon. Members have already spoken about ME, which is non-specific and can sometimes be difficult to diagnose. The main issue that I would raise in that regard is that people should be believed.

Support is already being delivered across Scotland for those suffering from long covid and the Scottish Government are committed to doing more. They recognise and acknowledge the impact that long covid can have on the health and wellbeing of those affected and have encouraged all employers to apply fair work principles and a flexible approach to dealing with the impacts of covid-19 to protect the health and wellbeing of the workforce.

In the event that NHS Scotland staff are absent due to covid, current temporary measures ensure that they are paid as if they are at work and that they are not subject to corresponding sickness absence triggers. The Scottish Government continue to support NHS colleagues with the provision of those temporary sickness absence measures in the event that they contract covid-19.

Again, the Scottish Government have a long covid strategic network that helps to bring together clinical experts, NHS boards and lived experience. For any disease or issue, lived experience can give those who are trying to help a real experience of what needs to be done. Following analysis and planning by the strategic network to identify where additional resource is needed, the first tranche of funding to NHS boards will be given early in the next financial year, which starts tomorrow. The fund will provide additional resource to support NHS boards to develop and deliver the best models of care appropriate for their populations.

This debate is about the effect on the workforce. It is important that the workforce know what may be wrong with them and that employers know what long covid is about. The Scottish Government carried out a marketing campaign in October and November last year to raise awareness of long covid and to signpost people to the appropriate support. The campaign supported the production of posters for display in community pharmacies and GP surgeries across Scotland in different languages, social media posts and a campaign toolkit that was sent to 250 direct partner contacts, with an additional distribution of approximately 3,000-plus places.

I mention the APPG and its good work. It recommended that the UK Government commit £100 million per annum to funding research into diagnostic and treatment pathways for long covid patients. The Scottish chief scientist office is funding patient-led and Scottish-led projects with a total commitment to funding. Again, that work is being done and disseminated widely.

I cannot finish without talking about statutory sick pay and its effect on people with long covid. It has a disproportionate impact on groups that are already disadvantaged in terms of work and health. To limit further health inequality, the UK Government must ensure a liveable sick pay for all. The SNP is clear that we must have a system fit for the 21st century and we need to look at the people who are earning the least,

[*Marion Fellows*]

because someone cannot even get statutory sick pay if they are earning less than £120 a week, which is the case for many.

The fact that the Government have moved away from having statutory sick pay from the first day of sickness has a huge impact on people. The Prime Minister claimed we should be more like the Germans and not go to work when we are sick, which is quite ironic considering that Germany has one of the best sick pay systems in Europe, with laws requiring employers to pay staff 100% of wages for the first six weeks of sickness. By contrast, the UK has one of the lowest. I remember being in this Chamber and listening to a Conservative Member saying that £96.35 a day in statutory sick pay was quite a good benefit. When she was told that it was £96.35 a week, she was quite shocked, and I was quite shocked that she did not know that. It is absolutely appalling. We are one of the richest countries in the world, and people cannot afford to stay off sick. It is just disgraceful, and the fact that people now have to qualify and wait—is it two weeks?—before they can even access it is just absolutely ridiculous.

The Government did not bring in an employment Bill in the last Queen's Speech, but they should in the next. Flexible working would also help people with long covid, as it would help them on the days when they are better able to work and perhaps do not need to trail into work. Again, there was a BEIS consultation, which ended over three months ago. Can we find out what has happened to that?

In conclusion, while employment law remains reserved to Westminster, the SNP Scottish Government are using their fair work policy to promote fairer working practices across the labour market in Scotland. I really urge the Minister to look at what is happening with low statutory sick pay, and to look at helping such people—and not just people with long covid, but as they are the subject of this debate, that would really be a huge improvement in the lives of those unfortunate enough to have this terrible condition.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister.

2.21 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for all the work she has done on this issue, and for the way she opened this debate. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it and the Members who have taken part. I thank in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), and I sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for his kind words. It is nice to know that my experiences have helped somebody else with theirs, and I wish his family member well for the future. I also thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), and my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), who is absolutely right to draw parallels with ME both in some of the symptoms and in how that community has been treated over a number of years. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—because he is my friend—for his kind words, too.

As colleagues will know, not least because it has been mentioned in this debate, long covid is an issue very close to my heart. Back in March 2020, I first caught covid. That was 107 weeks and four days ago, and I am still struggling with some of the symptoms of long covid all these weeks and days later. Back then, I felt rough with covid, but to my relief I avoided a lot of the more serious symptoms we were seeing on the news and hearing from friends and colleagues at that time. It was not great, but the fact that I was not hospitalised was a blessing.

However, when my self-isolation period ended and in theory I should have been fine to return to work, I found that I could not. I found that I was perpetually exhausted, and I could not catch my breath. I would be talking to my wife, and suddenly the words would vanish. I would try to pick them out, but I could not find the right ones. I would forget things and lose track of why I had come into a room. I would sweat as though I had run the London marathon just doing routine day-to-day things such as making a cup of tea. I felt completely terrified. My symptoms were not going anywhere, but instead evolving into something different and seemingly something permanent.

In May 2020, Elisa Perego coined the term “long covid” to describe these persistent and wide-ranging symptoms, and I felt like a bright light had been shone on what I had been going through. We now know that over 1.5 million people suffer with long covid in the United Kingdom, and that the majority of these—989,000—say it affects their daily activities. It certainly affected mine. I am very fortunate to have a brilliant team across Westminster and in my constituency of Denton and Reddish, and they stepped up on my worst days, when getting out of bed felt like running a marathon. They made sure that my constituents were still well represented, and that I was given sufficient time to rest when needed. Listening to my body was a hard lesson, too.

However, millions of people in this country are not as fortunate as I was. We have some of the worst sick pay provision in the OECD, and we are in an age of precarious work. In that context, long covid becomes an economic as well as a health emergency. The fact of the matter is that there has been an acute failure on the part of Government to take long covid as seriously as perhaps they should, because it is not just a health issue, but an employment and a DWP issue. The Government could and, I believe, should be doing more to encourage workplaces to better support those suffering from long covid and to enable employers to understand precisely what long covid means for their workforce.

For December 2021 to January 2022, the most recent period we have access to, it has been shown that, of the 1.5 million people currently suffering from long covid, only 2,869 had attempted to access the post-covid assessment service. Of that tiny number, 34% had been waiting for longer than 15 weeks. Something is going very wrong. Almost 1 million people are reporting long covid symptoms that are adversely affecting their day-to-day lives, yet just a fraction are attempting to access care and only a fraction of those are actually getting it. I would be grateful if, in his response, the Minister set out what conversations he has had with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care about these figures, and what action the Government will be taking to ensure that those who have long covid can actually access the care they desperately need.

This is actually quite crucial because, with the right rehabilitation package, work can become viable again for a proportion of those people. I want to share with the Minister some data I have received from Nuffield Health. Operating a free 12-week programme, it has so far helped over 1,900 people from across the UK to recover from the prolonged effects of covid-19, including breathlessness, anxiety and fatigue, and I am one of the 1,900 who have taken part in that free programme. Its results to date show that for 64% of people the programme improved mental wellbeing, for 39% it improved their functional capacity and for 39% it improved their breathlessness, while 35% saw an improvement in fitness and 30%—not an insubstantial number—were absent from work but felt they could return. This is not a silver bullet for all, because those are still minority figures, but I think that 30% being able to return to work with the right rehabilitation programme is quite encouraging.

As has been pointed out on numerous occasions, 4% of the UK workforce currently have long covid. That is an extraordinarily high number of people, and it will no doubt be having an impact both on workplace productivity and on wider employment outcomes. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has found that a quarter of UK employers cited long covid as one of the main causes of long-term sickness among their staff, yet those living with long covid have had very little in the way of workplace protection.

In my capacity as shadow Minister for public health, I have been inundated with stories of employees facing an uphill battle to have reasonable adjustments implemented in their workplaces. I have heard from doctors unable to return to work and NHS staff who have been sacked or had contracts terminated because of long covid symptoms. They are the people who carried us through the pandemic—we stood on our doorsteps for them and applauded them. We can do much better than that.

I turn to the help that I had in returning to work. I pay tribute to Mr Speaker and the staff in the Speaker's Office, because I am lucky enough to work in an environment where reasonable adjustments were made. When I first returned to the House in person after the summer recess, I found that I could not bob in the Chamber without becoming incredibly fatigued, and that would trigger my brain fog. After almost collapsing during a ministerial statement on Afghanistan—I had been bobbing for almost an hour—I arranged for a meeting with Mr Speaker on the basis that I could not do my job and, if I could not do a simple task like bobbing up and down, I might as well pack up and leave. Mr Speaker and his brilliant staff advised me that instead of rising on each occasion, I could simply hold up my Order Paper. That simple solution made a huge difference to my health and wellbeing. I sincerely thank Mr Speaker, and indeed you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the staff in the Speaker's Office for being so understanding.

However, reasonable adjustments should not just be made for Members of Parliament. The Government need to do much more to empower employees to approach their bosses and have these conversations. The problem is that, with practically zero workplace protections in place for long covid, they become incredibly difficult to have.

The Opposition recognise the threat that long covid poses both to the health of this nation and to the British workforce. That is why we would end the postcode

lottery of long covid care provision, fix the shameful state of sick pay and engage with employers to support those living with long covid. Covid has not gone anywhere, and it is profoundly irresponsible to stick fingers in ears and pretend that 1.5 million people are not still struggling. Free lateral flow testing will end tomorrow and, as a result, covid cases will rise. It will make it much harder to track the level of covid in the UK and, by extension, the number of people who may go on to develop and live with long covid.

Layla Moran: I am glad that the hon. Member has brought up that point. He will have heard about the difficulties that people have in accessing benefits and proving that they have long covid. People get long covid from covid, but, if they cannot get a test, how do they know if they have had covid? That makes it so much more difficult for people to prove long covid down the line and access the benefits that they deserve.

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. That is a real concern of mine, not least because I have experienced it. I was in the first wave of covid, having caught it in the weeks when the Government said, "If you develop symptoms, you no longer need to test; just go into self-isolation." I knew that I had covid, and I know that that led to long covid, but to this day I cannot prove it because there was no routine testing available to show it. That is a real issue.

I am incredibly worried that getting rid of free testing is a short-term decision that will have major financial and public health implications for the foreseeable future. The Government cannot turn a blind eye to a problem that is having a devastating impact on the people of this country. One of the defining lessons of the pandemic is that we do not have the luxury of dithering and delay when it comes to public health. We urgently need a cross-departmental long covid strategy. I would support that, work on it and gladly give my experience and advice to Ministers to help develop it. We need a long covid strategy, we need proper sick pay, and we need the Government to understand that they have an important role in working with business and industry to ensure that reasonable adjustments and support in the workplace become a thing for all, not just for me.

2.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on opening the debate so incredibly well, and I congratulate her, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter)—unfortunately he could not be here—on securing this important debate on the impact of long covid in the workplace. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and all those who have taken part in the debate for their thoughtful and insightful comments.

We heard about the ONS estimate that, in the four-week period ending 31 January 2022, 1.5 million people in the UK reported experiencing ongoing symptoms following covid. Of them, nearly 300,000 reported that their ability to undertake day-to-day activities had been significantly limited. It is therefore clear, as we have heard, that long covid presents a growing challenge for the workplace and more widely. The emergence of a completely new

[Paul Scully]

condition such as long covid is a real rarity and, much like our experience of the covid-19 pandemic itself, we must be and are constantly developing our understanding.

We have put support in place for those suffering from the condition. NHS England has invested £224 million to date to provide care for people with long covid. It has established 90 long covid assessment services across England, which are assessing and diagnosing people experiencing long-term health effects as a result of covid-19 infection, whether they have had a positive test or are likely to have long covid based on their clinical symptoms, regardless of whether they were admitted to hospital during their covid-19 illness. The services offer physical, cognitive and psychological assessment and, where appropriate, refer patients to existing services for treatment and rehabilitation. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon talked about the \$1 billion in the States. Not all of that has been allocated yet, while the UK is already ploughing ahead, and we are quite far ahead of other countries, including the States, in our research in the area. Of course, there is always more that we can do.

It is clearly essential to get the right healthcare and treatment in place for individuals, for employers and for the wider economy. However, the theme of the debate is the impact of long covid in the workplace. People can suffer from many long-term health and other conditions that may affect their work. We have heard about ME, and we could talk about fibromyalgia, Guillain-Barré, Miller Fisher all those things. Indeed, there are other conditions that are not necessarily post-viral.

Earlier this month, I gave evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee on the impact of the menopause in the workplace, and in February I responded for the Government to a Westminster Hall debate on supporting people with endometriosis in the workplace. Those are different conditions, but, none the less, they are long lasting and we need to ensure that we can get people the right treatments and adjustments. Indeed, in the case of the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), a simple, natural adjustment made his working life so much easier, and for so many of these other conditions there are examples of small things that employers can do to keep people in the workplace. They do not have to be complicated, and they certainly do not have to be expensive.

We believe that employers should play a significant role in supporting people with long-term health conditions to access and remain in work. That can certainly benefit individuals as well as bringing real bottom-line benefits to employers through, for example, avoiding recruitment costs and not unnecessarily losing experienced and valued members of staff.

However, it is not sustainable for every condition to get different or special treatment. For employers, that could lead to confusion and complexity; likewise for employees. That is why the Government's starting position is that, specifically in the workplace and in the overall framework for providing health support to employees, long covid should be treated the same as any other long-term health condition. Let me set out that framework, which, as hon. Members would expect, is a cross-departmental effort.

The Government's response to the "Health is everyone's business" consultation, led by the Department for Work and Pensions, was published in July 2021. It sets out some of the measures that we will take to protect and maintain the progress made to reduce ill health-related job loss and see 1 million more disabled people in work from 2017 through to 2027.

Debbie Abrahams: I am listening keenly to the Minister, but the issue is that this is an infectious disease that is contracted partly as a result of exposure, and there is clear evidence that exposure happens in the workplace. It is therefore not the same as existing progressive or fluctuating illnesses; it is very much an infectious disease contracted in the workplace. That is the basis for our recommendations.

Paul Scully: I understand the hon. Member's point. I am trying to set out the framework for managing long-term illness, but clearly, we still have support in the workplace for those with infectious diseases. I cited ME, fibromyalgia, Guillain-Barré syndrome and Miller Fisher syndrome, which are all post-viral infections—an infection beforehand typically leads to those other long-lasting conditions. That is why I am compartmentalising the framework, but none the less, I take the hon. Member's point about the infections happening in the first place.

"Health is everyone's business" did not consult on long covid, or any other specific health condition for that matter; it looked at system-level measures to support employers and employees to manage any health condition or disability in the workplace. The measures that we are taking forward include providing greater clarity on employer and employee rights and responsibilities by developing a national digital information and advice service; working with the Health and Safety Executive to develop a set of clear and simple principles that employers would be expected to apply to support disabled people and those with long-term health conditions in the work environment; and increasing access to occupational health services, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises, which, as we know, are currently underserved.

As I said, although those measures are not long covid-specific, they are key steps in our effort to change the workplace culture around health and sickness management. That will benefit those suffering from long covid in the same way as those suffering from other longer-term health issues or disability.

As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) said, we are also responsible for flexible working. We know that that policy can be incredibly helpful to those suffering from many long-term health conditions, including long covid, as they seek to manage the symptoms, some of which we have heard about today, such as extreme tiredness, insomnia, depression and anxiety. Although flexible working does not provide the whole answer, it can be an important tool for employers and employees as they have discussions about how better to balance the demands of work and life, particularly for those managing long-term health conditions.

The consultation on flexible working introduced plans for a future call for evidence on ad hoc flexible working; we want to explore how non-contractual flexibility works in practice. I discussed that with the Flexible Working Taskforce in February. We will ensure that the role of ad hoc flexible working to support those with long covid

and other health conditions—such as the menopause and endometriosis, which I have mentioned—is part of its considerations.

Marion Fellows: Is the Minister looking at cutting the time before someone can apply for flexible working? At the moment, they have to have been in work for quite a long while before they can do so.

Paul Scully: Our manifesto committed to consult on this issue. Within that consultation, we looked at a day one right to request flexible working. That is key, because it will attract people to and keep them in a good workplace. We might as well start as we are set to carry on.

Another significant part of the cross-departmental framework is the Government Equalities Office, which is responsible for the Equality Act 2010. That is an important part of the matrix, because it may protect those with long-term health conditions from discrimination. That Act ensures that any person with a condition that meets the definition of a disability is protected, so it should not be stigmatised. The Act describes disability as

“a physical or mental impairment”

that

“has a substantial and long-term adverse effect”

on a person’s

“ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities”.

We heard about that not least from the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish and during the incredibly passionate speech of the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), who cited the example of his family member. By the way, I know how difficult it is for an hon. Member to describe a family member who is suffering from something that we are debating, and I thank him for his personalised experience, which has informed the House and positively contributed so much to the debate.

As I said, the disability should not be stigmatised, though some may do so. This is simply about the impairment, as we have heard loud and clear. “Long-term” is defined as having lasted, or being likely to last for, at least 12 months. “Substantial” is defined as more than minor or trivial, as we have heard strongly in Members’ examples today.

The Act makes it clear that it is not necessary for the cause of the impairment to be established, nor does the impairment have to be the result of an illness. A disability can therefore arise from a wide range of impairments. That means that any person who falls within that definition will already be protected as having a disability. That can therefore encompass some of the emerging effects of long covid, but every case will be different and should be considered on its merits.

As well as paying tribute to the hon. Member for City of Chester, I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon and ask her to pass on our regards to Andrew, Nell and Rebecca. We also heard about Julie

Wells and her daughter and the caring responsibilities involved. The examples that we have had really add colour and inform the debate.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw talked about statutory sick pay. We have discussed the fact that we need to look at statutory sick pay, but this is not the time to do so, particularly while we are in the middle of the pandemic. However, we also need to look at statutory sick pay in the round. She mentioned people earning under £120 a week, but many in that situation are already in receipt of other benefits. That is what I mean about not just concentrating on one issue; we need to look at the whole person and their whole personal finance.

In summary, we are supporting people with long-term health conditions, including long covid, by working hard on the general approach to work and health, through our response to the “Health is everyone’s business” consultation, and taking steps to make some of our employment rights work a little harder to support those balancing work with other issues and challenges. All that is underpinned by the protections against discrimination provided by the Equality Act. We must also showcase the good employers, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for City of Chester.

Layla Moran: If I understand this correctly, the consultation is happening and guidance will be provided more comprehensively for all longer-term illnesses. The issue particularly with long covid is that it is so new that many employers do not have a clue what it is. Will he consider suggesting a public health information campaign particularly targeted at businesses so that they know that it exists and where they can go for such guidance?

Paul Scully: I often talk about ACAS guidance, which, obviously, is available in this area. The hon. Lady mentioned what she saw as shortfalls in that guidance. We will always look at that to make sure that guidance is up to date, especially with an evolving condition such as long covid. I keep citing the example of ME, which, like fibromyalgia, is one of those diseases that is very poorly understood by so many people in the workplace and even, frankly, by health professionals. It will evolve and I am sure that we will be able to push that information out to employers.

I hope that hon. Members would agree that there is a wide-ranging set of actions to address long-term health issues in the workplace, whatever those health conditions are. We want to encourage a better culture around work and health, including for those suffering from long covid. I firmly believe that it is an important principle to have a single, consistent and clear approach to managing health in the workplace. It is unsustainable to have a number of different approaches for different conditions. I close by thanking everyone once again for this helpful and informative debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of long covid on the UK workforce.

Easter Adjournment

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Let us take a moment to remember that this debate was always the point in the parliamentary calendar when our late colleague Sir David Amess would make one of his amazing speeches. He would cover 10, 12 or more different topics in about four or five minutes. He would be right there in his place, and we would all think, “Oh, no—what’s he going to say next? How many times will he manage to mention his constituency?” But his perseverance prevailed eventually, making his beloved town of Southend a city. On all the matters that he raised, year after year after year, he was listened to. He made his mark. It is very good for us to remember him for a moment.

2.50 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

Having moved the motion on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee, I will start by paying tribute—as you did, Madam Deputy Speaker—to the late Sir David. I think the real problem was for the person replying to the debate, who had to try to give an answer to the 20-odd items that he had raised, as well as everyone else’s. We remember Sir David at this time. The debates cannot be the same without him, but as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, we have urged on behalf of the Committee that the summer recess Adjournment debate be titled the Sir David Amess Adjournment debate. We hope that we will not need a resolution of the House to make that our practice.

The Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), would have led this debate, but unfortunately he was taken ill this morning and has had to return home. On behalf of the whole House, I wish him well for a speedy recovery and some time off over Easter.

Before the House rises for the recess, I wish to raise a series of points. First, we are already dealing with the terrible situation in Ukraine and with Ukrainian refugees, but we should not forget that we are still dealing, as I understand it, with 12,000 Afghan refugees who are still in hotels in this country and have not been resettled. Most of them are on a six-month leave-to-remain visa. Those visas will expire very soon, but we have not received updates from the Home Office. In my constituency, 656 households have relatives who are seeking to escape from Afghanistan or have arrived here. They are all in a position of complete uncertainty about their future.

The response that my office is getting from the Home Office is “We are processing applications as soon as we can.” The responses lack clarity. I urge the Leader of the House: we need some clarity on what will happen to those Afghan citizens. Quite rightly, we are all concentrating on the Ukrainians at the moment, but we must not forget those who are here already.

At business questions today, I raised a situation relating to Harrow Council, but that is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the council’s responses to my requests to resolve cases. As we all know, MPs have no control or executive powers over councils, but we constantly raise matters with them about items of business for our constituents. Harrow Council is incredibly slow in resolving

cases. We now have many cases that have been unresolved for more than a year; earlier today I raised a constituent’s case that has not had a response for 19 months. It is unacceptable in the extreme that local authorities are in that position.

Equally, my constituents face frustrations with accessibility. Harrow Council and perhaps other councils have increasingly moved from answering the telephone to doing things online. Not everyone has online facilities, but the council refuses point blank to answer the telephone at all. That leaves many of my constituents frustrated and unable to get service.

I also wish to raise the issue of safety at night in Harrow. Now that the covid restrictions have ended, more people are commuting—coming into central London for work purposes, and then returning home. Of course the nights will get shorter and the days will get longer, but when women, in particular, are returning home after dark, they experience real fear owing to the distance they have to walk from stations to their homes and the risks they are running. Many residents have contacted me about this. I am pleased to say that the Metropolitan police are taking action to provide women with escorts, if required, to accompany them from stations to places of safety. That is a welcome move; we often criticise the Metropolitan police, but I think we should congratulate them on this particular initiative. Nevertheless, the matter is clearly of great concern.

Many private landlords, certainly in my constituency, are raising rents exponentially, terminating long-term contracts and leases and then converting their properties into flats or houses in multiple occupation. None of them is being registered as a house in multiple occupation. Because there is less scrutiny of the private sector, constituents are being left either homeless or completely out of pocket. This is an outrage, in my view. The Government need to produce the renters’ reform Bill that has been promised, and I trust that it will be in the Queen’s Speech and will be implemented very soon. In this context, I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

In my constituency, mandatory water meters are being rolled out by the local water company, Affinity Water. Many of my constituents fear that bills will rise as a result, rather than being based on water rates. The company is installing the meters without consulting people or even asking for consent. This is a compulsory process, and is, I believe, meeting with considerable resistance.

I suspect that other Members on both sides of the House are, like me, receiving complaints from constituents about the lack of face-to-face appointments to see general practitioners. This, in my constituency, has continued for far too long. Obviously, under covid restrictions there was a reason for people to speak to their GPs either on the telephone or virtually, and, indeed, I think there are advantages in a telephone conversation between patient and GP to ensure that the GP routes the patient to the right service, but once the patient has been routed to that service, a face-to-face appointment will clearly be necessary. Most of the conditions that cause people to want to see their GP—or a medical professional—require proper examination, but that is not happening in my constituency, and I suspect that, despite efforts from the Health Secretary, they are not happening in other parts of the country.

Veterans of these debates will know that I never let the opportunity pass without mentioning Stanmore station. The Mayor of London—who does nothing much at all times—has submitted a planning application, over the heads of the people of Stanmore, to build multi-storey high-density flats on the car park, thus drastically reducing the number of parking spaces available. Given that Stanmore station is the terminus of the Jubilee line and is therefore often considered to be the car park for Wembley stadium, this is an outrageous measure. I must congratulate Harrow Council's planning committee, which rejected the Mayor's planning application—on very good grounds, although it could have gone a bit further in terms of grounds for its rejection. What did the Mayor do? He called the planning application in for him to consider. The Mayor of London is marking his own homework. I wonder which way his decision will go.

I urge my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to ensure that if the Mayor does grant his own planning application, over the heads of the members of Harrow Council's planning committee, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will call it in and make sure it is dealt with properly, effectively, and in line with what local people want to see.

The key point is that if the car park is radically reduced, people will be deterred from using public transport. Instead of driving to the station, parking and then using public transport, they will drive much further into London. So it completely defeats the objective. As I have said, Stanmore is the car park for Wembley stadium on event days, and that car park is full every day of the week at the moment.

We also have a proposal for high-density, multi-storey flats on Stanmore Broadway, which is raising some interesting responses from residents. Planning permission was given for a smaller development some 10 years ago and never implemented, but this is now a very high-density proposal indeed. Harrow councillors, the Stanmore Society and the development firm are holding consultation meetings and, to be fair to the developers, they are doing a good job of consulting residents and users of the shops to ensure that whatever scheme eventually gets submitted as a proper planning application, it will be in keeping with their concerns.

Another issue that is frequently raised with me is the do-nothing Mayor of London's constant attacks on motorists. The latest wheeze is the ultra low emission zone expansion scheme. It will extend to the whole of the Greater London area, beyond the north and south circular roads, and have a dramatic impact on poorer people and those who run small businesses who cannot afford the most modern vehicles. What we need to understand is that there is a shortage of new cars because of the worldwide shortage of semiconductors. This has led to very high prices for second-hand vehicles, and fuel prices have already rocketed. This damages the people who have to travel to do their business. It is all very well talking about having transport links to central London, but this involves people travelling around London, which is becoming more difficult, particularly for people who have to travel with tools and other such facilities. It is an outrage that this extension is being implemented.

The Mayor was of course completely silent when his paymasters, the RMT, went on strike and brought London transport to a halt. He is very vocal when

attacking motorists, but makes no comment on that kind of inconvenience to the travelling public. The issue here is that the consultation will commence in May, after the local elections, and run for 10 weeks. I urge everyone in London to respond to this consultation by saying that they do not want the extension and that it is an outrage that should not be followed through.

Finally, I have to raise an issue that some of us were debating yesterday: getting England to be smoke-free by 2030. Currently, one in seven people smoke, and the numbers are still going down. That is good news—in 1971, it was 50%—but we still have a long way to go to get to a smoke-free England. The worst aspect of this is that 280 children take up smoking every day in England, of whom only a third will manage to quit in their lifetime and another third of whom will die from a smoking-related disease. That is why I strongly support the age of sale being raised. When it was raised from 18 to 21 in the United States, smoking rates decreased by nearly a third among 18 to 20-year-olds.

The legislation proposed by the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health would raise the smoking age from 18 to 21 for legal sale. That proposal is supported by the vast majority of the adult population in this country, including more than 50% of 18 to 24-year-olds themselves. I would also urge the Government to consider the levy that we have proposed, which we debated yesterday. Implementing such a levy on the profits of the big tobacco companies would raise £700 million. They can well afford it, and that money could be directed into smoking cessation services and making this country healthier.

In closing, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you, the staff and all colleagues a very happy Easter and a good break. I know that some people out there think it is holiday, but for the next two weeks I shall be teaching no fewer than 16 work experience students what it is like to be a hard-working MP, as we all are, in my constituency and giving them the opportunity to think about whether they want to pursue it as a career, although they may be a bit wiser than that after they have spent two weeks with me.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Given how many Members are standing, I can advise the House that I am not going to put on a time limit because I hope that we can manage without one. However, if people speak for more than seven or eight minutes, not only will they lose the attention of the House—*[Laughter]* I think it is time that somebody actually told the truth—but they will also prevent their colleagues from having an equal opportunity to air the matters that are important in their constituency. That is just guidance, which I am sure will be kept in mind by Siobhan McDonagh.

3.6 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It certainly will, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I have one single very important issue to bring to the attention of the House and the Leader of the House—a tragic case of dangerous driving. I also want to raise a clear gap in the law that I hope he will agree it is both easy and essential for the Government to change.

[Siobhain McDonagh]

In the early hours of Christmas morning, two policemen knocked on my constituent Debbie's door. A 3 am visit from the emergency services was their worrying signal that something bad had happened, but for Debbie, Michael, Donna and all the Clack family, the news was their very worst nightmare.

Debbie's daughter, Lillie, had been in a car whose intoxicated driver had refused to slow or stop for the police. The car had careered into a tree, leading to the hospitalisation of Lillie Clack and the injury of several others in the car. Devastatingly, Lillie died just a few days later, in the afternoon of 28 December. For Lillie's family, their lives have changed forever. Nothing will bring her home.

But if the grief of a lost daughter, sister and niece was not enough, the time since has brought further pain to the Clack family, and it is because of a gap in the law. As it stands, there is nothing to prevent someone charged with dangerous driving, even in this situation, where a young woman has lost her life, from continuing to drive until their case gets to court and they are found guilty. For families waiting years for a trial, their unimaginable grief is worsened by the knowledge that the driver responsible for the death of their loved one can legally jump back in their car and get back on to the roads.

The Clack family are campaigning for anyone who causes death while driving to have their licence suspended immediately. Their Change.org petition already has tens of thousands of supportive signatures, and I would like to quote from the family's petition directly.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Lady continues with what is a heartbreaking story—all our hearts go out to the family in this awful tragedy—I am sure she will give consideration to sub judice rules, and that if this is a matter that has yet to come before the courts, she will be very careful to anonymise the case to which she is referring.

Siobhain McDonagh: I can assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that there will be no reference to those involved in the particular case or to anyone who will potentially be charged.

The petition states:

"The law needs to change! If it doesn't, people will continue to die and families will continue to endure the torment and torture after losing a loved one.

We will never get Lillie back and the experience so far can't be changed but we will fight to endeavour that no other family has to go through the hell that comes after a loved one has been killed by a driver that made a choice to drive recklessly and dangerously!"

Will the Leader of the House indicate in his closing remarks whether he agrees with me and the Clack family that there is a clear and rectifiable gap in the law? If that is the case, will he take this issue up with the relevant Minister to report back?

Sadly, this is not the only painful experience that the family has had to face since Lillie's death. Around a dozen videos have been uploaded anonymously to YouTube, featuring Lillie's name, photograph and details of her death. The purpose of the videos is unclear, other than to cause further pain to the family. My office has repeatedly been in contact with YouTube to call for the videos to be taken down. Although progress is finally

being made, it has taken weeks of discussion and delay. It seems the threshold for removing harmful content is, appallingly, higher than the trolling of a mourning family.

My heart goes out to the Clack family for the pain that they have suffered these past three months. I hope the Leader of the House will agree that changing the dangerous driving law is unquestionably the right thing to do. I know his assurance that he will take this forward will be of considerable comfort to a grieving family.

3.11 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I want to raise two local issues relating to my Congleton constituency—one has wider implications—and one international issue.

First, my constituent Oliver Niblett, of the small family building business Niblett Homes Ltd of Middlewich, has written to me

"on behalf of my company and all small-scale property developers experiencing the same frustrations...with local authority planning departments".

The length of time it takes for an application to proceed through the planning process is, to use his words, "almost unbearable". He says the system effectively penalises small developers:

"Large building companies can better manage these delays because they have the funds to bank land and apply for permission well in advance, however small bespoke developers such as ourselves do not have that luxury and are facing a bleak future."

Indeed, he says, constant delays are

"putting small companies out of business."

Mr Niblett's company was founded by his father, and Oliver Niblett now works in it with his brother. The financial pressures on such a business, which cannot afford to invest for a long time the huge sum required even for one plot of land on which to build a house—it can take 12 months from purchase to the beginning of development—are making life extremely difficult for the family. He tells me:

"It is now taking a minimum of 4 months before a planning application is even assigned to a case officer for consideration."

Until a planning application is assigned—that is, before it is considered live—it is virtually impossible to speak to anyone at the council about it. If the case is assigned, it is at least six months before permission is granted. If someone has the misfortune to submit the wrong form or make an error, they can be put to the back of the queue and be looking at another four-month wait after resubmission.

A current application has caused Mr Niblett to contact me. This was not even a new application; his family business had bought a house with existing planning permission, but in order to modify that permission, the business was required by the council to put in a whole new application. The key concerns he raises are, first, that

"delays and extensions make it impossible to plan our work schedule";

secondly, the

"unnecessary bureaucracy when wanting to amend an existing application";

thirdly, the

"prioritisation of larger developments (who are more able to tolerate delays than smaller projects)";

fourthly, that the complaints process only leads people into more bureaucracy; and, fifthly, the way that applicants are treated by council officers,

“the likes of which would not be tolerated in the private sector.”

Mr Niblett is fully aware that this issue does not relate exclusively to our local authority of Cheshire East Council. I have contacted it and I hope that my raising his case today will prompt it to ensure that he receives his decision without further delay. After considerable delay, that decision was due on 29 March, although he tells me that as of yesterday he had not heard about it. The council has responded to me about these concerns by saying,

“the planning system faces a real challenge in terms of the availability of skilled workers in the sector and the high levels of demand placed on the system...the Council has not been able to turnover the same volume of applications as it was pre-pandemic...due to...staffing issues, procedural changes enforced because of working from home”—

I sincerely hope that has now changed—

“and a surge in planning applications submissions...”

To conclude...it is advocated by many professionals working in the sector that the key to improvements nationally is to support, skill and resource the planning system”.

I hope that Ministers will take account of that, because businesses such as Niblett Homes, which are founded, run and worked in by people who live locally, are, it goes without saying, the lifeblood of constituencies such as mine.

The second issue I wish to raise relates to Astbury Place in Congleton and, in particular, the bridge into Congleton park. This is a long-standing issue, but it is still unresolved, and I have been asked to raise it by a resident, Neil Taylor. He informs me that construction of a bridge from this relatively new development, although it has now been standing several years, into Congleton park,

“has been opposed by the majority of residents for several years. The developer has offered money in lieu of the bridge to fund another project within the town which would provide a greater benefit to a much larger group within the wider community.”

That refers to a pedestrian crossing on Brook Street. Mr Taylor has carried out a local survey, which he has asked me to speak about. He has calculated that 63 properties are “in scope” in the Astbury Place community, although one was unoccupied and so he surveyed 62. He asked how many occupants would like the pedestrian crossing. He received 56 responses, with 46 supporting the crossing in lieu of the bridge, which is some 82%. Those in eight properties would rather still have the bridge and two other respondents did not express a view. Mr Taylor fully accepts that there are those who would rather have the bridge and who have very strong feelings about this. Indeed, to put matters fairly on the record, I must say that I have received correspondence from residents to that effect. However, Mr Taylor has asked me to point out that this has now gone on for some considerable time. He has lived there for more than seven years, and the section 106 agreement was signed more than 10 years ago. He tells me that over the years a number of people who initially preferred a bridge would now rather have the road crossing. Not having the bridge does not change anything today, as people there have lived without it for so long. I asked him what he would like me to achieve through highlighting this today. He told me that residents would like an in-person conversation with someone from Cheshire

East Council who is willing to listen to them. He hoped therefore that even at this point in time a dialogue could be arranged, bearing in mind the figures that he has established representing what he believes is the majority view. I hope that that will now be the case.

Finally, I wish to raise an issue that comes from a considerable distance away, from Pakistan. On 21 March, an 18-year-old Hindu girl, Pooja Kumari, was shot dead in Sindh province. According to media reports, the alleged killer wanted to convert Pooja to Islam and marry her. When she refused, the alleged killer attempted to abduct her and, following a struggle, shot her. Local police arrested the alleged killer on 22 March. I would like to express my condolences to Pooja’s family. Tragically, the abduction of young girls in Pakistan for forced marriage and forced conversion is far too common, and it is affecting not only Hindus such as Pooja, but Christians and Sikhs. Some estimates put the number affected at as many as 1,000 girls a year. This is simply unacceptable. We must call this out more strongly, and challenge it to see change. I hope that is one outcome that will come out of the conference to be held here in London in July on freedom of religion or belief for everyone, everywhere, when we will gather together faith leaders and representatives, civil society activists and Government Ministers from countries around the world, not only to discuss freedom of religion or belief concerns, but, I hope, to develop practical solutions to address these concerns.

Alongside the conference, we are planning a FORB fringe—largely organised through the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief—at which around 100 side events will take place to highlight FORB concerns. Having worked internationally as the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief for more than a year, I am proud that the all-party parliamentary group now has 157 members. It is a cross-party group the likes of which does not exist anywhere else in the world. It is a tribute to parliamentarians here and the way they have raised freedom of religion or belief and put it on the international agenda.

3.20 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I fully endorse your proposal, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the summer Adjournment debate should be known as the David Amess Adjournment debate. The speed with which he described Southend means that whenever I go there I simply run to keep up with the sites that he used to describe to us. It would be nice to remember him in that way.

I wish to speak about the refugee crisis around the world and offer some thoughts on where it might come to. As we go into the Easter Adjournment, around 70 million people around the world are refugees. They are refugees from wars, famine, human rights abuse and poverty, and refugees fleeing intolerance in their societies. They are all people who want to survive and contribute to the world. They are often treated brutally wherever they try to escape to. Indeed, on our own continent, Europe, many are dying in the Mediterranean and, sadly, some are dying in the English channel trying to get to this country. Such injustice has to be compared with the rhetoric with which we claim to be supportive and always welcoming of refugees—we are not and we have not been.

[*Jeremy Corbyn*]

I totally and absolutely condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the bombing of civilian targets and the killing of people, and I have every sympathy for all those who have had to flee from Ukraine to try to get to a place of safety. I absolutely welcome the way in which people in this country—apparently 200,000 of them—have offered space in their own homes to refugees from Ukraine, and the fact that those who come here will be able to stay here, will get papers immediately and will get the right to work. I absolutely welcome and support all that. Indeed, in my constituency and borough, many people are taking part in fundraising efforts to assist Ukrainian people. There obviously needs to be an urgent ceasefire, a withdrawal of forces and a long-term settlement that brings about peace and security for people in the whole region. There must also be a recognition of the bravery of many peace campaigners in Russia who have opposed the war and are now in prison as a result. All wars end in a peace process, and I hope we can get to that point much more quickly.

I have to raise the uncomfortable truth of the contrast between the way Ukrainian refugees are supported by our media and by many politicians and people in our society, and the way refugees from other conflicts are not treated in the same way. The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) correctly pointed out that Afghan refugees are still waiting. Many of them have been waiting for months and months just to get papers to get somewhere to live so that they can contribute to and work in our society.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend raises a critical point. Does he agree that it is about time the Home Office looked at some of the restrictions on family members joining? They are still being asked to take the English language test. For a woman in Afghanistan, trying to do that under the Taliban is very challenging.

Jeremy Corbyn: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is totally correct. In her constituency and mine, there are people who have come from the most awful situations and wars around the world. They want to work and contribute—they are often very experienced and qualified—but are just languishing day in, day out in unsatisfactory and expensive temporary accommodation, unable to contribute to our health service, education service and so many other things. It is a crying shame and a crying waste.

There are victims of other wars in which we as a country have been involved. The war in Iraq created many refugees. The constant bombing in Palestine by Israel's occupying forces also creates refugees in that region, in Libya and around the world. In Yemen, which is now the world's worst humanitarian disaster, there has been constant bombing for a very long time by Saudi forces, which are armed and supplied by Britain. If we are serious about peace in the world and serious about these issues, we must question our own policies and our own activities. It is a bit strange when our Prime Minister quite rightly condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine and then, at the same time, asks Saudi Arabia to supply us with more oil, because we are not buying oil or gas from Russia—we did not buy that much gas from Russia anyway—and asks it to co-operate. Lewis Hamilton and others have done more for human

rights in Saudi Arabia than the British Government by simply speaking out against the human rights abuses that exist there. We must be consistent and clear in what we do—consistent and clear on the issue of human rights whether or not there is, as a result, an economic difficulty or cost.

None of these wars has happened by accident. I have mentioned a number, but there are many more around the world. This is also about the policies that led to them. A few days ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) and I had an interesting meeting with Mohamedou Ould Slahi, a Mauritanian national, who was taken to Guantanamo Bay. He suffered grievously there—waterboarding, torture, isolation, sleep deprivation, bright lights, loud music and everything else—for years. I was amazed by how rational he was in his discussions and observations of what had gone on there. He got out and is now teaching people about the dangers of it. He works in the Netherlands and other places to draw attention to it and is a writer of plays and so on. We have to ask ourselves how an innocent man ended up in Guantanamo Bay, other than through the atmosphere created by the war on terror by George Bush and others before 2003. Then we have to ask ourselves about how we get to the truth of these matters, and this is what I want to conclude with. The truth about these matters is that there was a long-term plan by the United States and others to invade Iraq through the war on terror—we can remember the axis of evil speech by George Bush in 2002.

There was also one journalist who told the world the truth about all this. Julian Assange revealed the truth about US matters, about what it was doing, about the war in Iraq, about Afghanistan and about the treatment of people. He revealed the truth. He will go down in history as a journalist who exposed what was going on, in the same way that others exposed what German rearmament was about in the 1930s, and human rights abuses in other places around the world, including in the Vietnam war, the Afghan war—all the Afghan wars for that matter—and others. Yet, he is in Belmarsh, a maximum security prison in this country, just a few miles from this House, and is not in a good physical state. Anybody in Belmarsh, particularly those who are not guilty of anything, will not be in a good physical state. Obviously, the court cases have gone on. At the moment, there are no legal processes going on, which is why I am able to bring this subject up in the House. I just ask for a sense of understanding of what Julian Assange has contributed to the world in trying to bring truth to power about what has actually happened. I would hope that this House would recognise that those who expose injustices and abuse are eventually remembered and recognised.

I will give a parallel: an unknown shipping clerk in Liverpool, E.D. Morel, observed things that were going back and forth from what was then the Belgian Congo in the late 19th and early 20th century. He started to investigate the appalling abuses of human rights in the Congo. He was vilified and attacked for doing so, but he persevered and prevailed. Eventually, he came to this House, becoming a Member and a Minister and so on. He exposed the truth and eventually saved lives in the Congo.

That tradition of people speaking out against abuses of human rights and injustice when they find them, whatever the consequences for themselves, is something

we should revere, welcome and support. We should not allow Julian Assange to be confined to prison in this country and possibly removed to the United States, where he would face a lifetime sentence—or even several lifetime sentences, in the ridiculousness of some of their legal decisions—and never see the light of day or be able to write again.

We need to think very carefully about what freedom of speech is. If we do not defend those who defend the right to know, and ensure that we get the right to know, we demean ourselves in the process. I hope that over Easter people will reflect on that, and our Ministers in the Home Office and other Departments will think for a moment about the consequences of denying freedom to somebody who has ensured that there is at least an understanding of how some of these atrocious wars and abuses of human rights came about.

3.31 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): On 1 July 2009, the Defence Secretary announced in this Chamber that recognised next of kin of service personnel killed on operations would qualify for a commemorative emblem called the Elizabeth Cross. That cross is made of silver and is about the size of a military cross—a gallantry award—which my own father was given in 1955 in Aden. It comes in a large form, about two inches square, and has a miniature too. It is accompanied by a scroll, signed by Her Majesty, bearing the name of the person who lost their life in the service of our country.

Everyone I know who has been given that badge wears it with huge pride. I—and we all—hope that it is of some, albeit limited, comfort to them. Personally, I have been involved in the awarding of the Elizabeth Cross to eight family members of soldiers who died while under my command. However, it does not make sense to me that those who protect us in non-military uniforms, such as the police, prison, fire and ambulance services, should not have a similar arrangement for their own next of kin if they are killed in the line of duty. I think they should, and so do many of us in this place.

Within 100 metres of this Chamber, our own Police Constable Keith Palmer, George Medal, was killed in New Palace Yard on 22 March 2017. He had a wife and children, and I think Mrs Palmer would qualify for such an award. All told, I understand the police services of our country have lost several hundred officers killed in the pursuit of their duty since the second world war—in other words, not that many. I gather, too, that between 1986 and 2013, the last year for which I could get figures, 26 firefighters were killed attending fires in the United Kingdom. Most of them, of course, had close loved ones, so how about an award similar to the Elizabeth Cross for the blue light services?

By blue light services, I mean the police, prison officers, and fire and ambulance services, in the first instance, but the award might be expanded to include the coastguard and other organisations that save people, such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, as well as mountain and mine rescue teams. The award could be given to recognised next of kin with similar criteria to that necessary for the award of the Elizabeth Cross—in other words, the closest loved ones of those that have been killed.

I suggest that if this idea were to be taken up, the award should be of the same quality as the armed forces' Elizabeth Cross, which is somewhat splendid and much prized by those that wear it. The cross—please make it a cross, not a medal; a cross is so much more distinctive—would look good in silver, designed along equivalent lines to those given to the next of kin of armed forces personnel. In short, it must stand out as special, and so it should be. Surely the next of kin of blue light service personnel who die protecting us are just as deserving as armed forces personnel who die for the same reason. I believe that at this time, and with the permission of Her Majesty the Queen, the award might be called the Prince Philip Cross.

I have been campaigning for this for some time now. I have previously raised the idea in the House and I do not apologise for doing so again. Last night, I told my good friend the Crime and Policing Minister that I was going to raise the matter once more. The Minister encouraged me and repeated what he had said before—that he fully supports the idea. I am now looking at the Leader of the House, who is writing, “This is a really good idea.” [*Laughter.*] He has that quizzical smile on his face. Based on what I gather about the institution of the Elizabeth Cross in 2009, it might not even need legislation, just a ministerial decision at the right level. Would it not be appropriate to include the establishment of such an award for the next of kin of blue light service personnel killed in the line of duty, protecting us, in the Queen's Speech? Do I make my point, Leader of the House? He nods.

3.37 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): Before we rise for the recess, I would like to raise three outstanding issues important to my constituents.

One of the things I will be doing over the recess is going for a walk along the River Chess—one of the chalk streams located in my constituency. There are fewer than 300 chalk streams in the world, and 85% of them can be found here in England. In Chesham and Amersham we are lucky to have two—the Misbourne and the Chess. Neither currently has a “good” ecological status. These rivers, along with the rest of England's chalk streams, are under severe threat from a combination of over-abstraction, pollution, and other forms of environmental damage. At the most water-stressed times of year, the flow of the River Chess is at 41% below natural, and in places the Misbourne does not flow at all.

It is clear to me that these special rivers need heightened protections so that we do not lose them and the array of animal and plant wildlife that rely on them. In October last year, the Catchment Based Approach's chalk stream restoration strategy was published. The Government have previously stated their commitment to protecting chalk streams and welcomed this strategy. I therefore urge them to look at its key recommendation—a call for an overarching level of protection and priority status for chalk streams. Such a designation would inject energy and investment into the protection of chalk streams, and I hope the Government will look at introducing legislation to enact it. I hope that might also afford additional considerations in the planning of major infrastructure projects likely to damage chalk streams.

[Sarah Green]

The second issue I wish to raise is the further threat facing my local chalk streams from the construction of HS2. As I speak, two tunnel-boring machines are eating their way through the Chilterns, demolishing the chalk aquifer below as they go. I have previously raised my concerns about the loss of bentonite into the aquifer. This is just one example where it has been made clear that HS2 is being constructed with a complete lack of consideration for the environments it is destroying and people it is impacting.

I note that the company's community engagement strategy, last updated in October, is titled "Respecting People, Respecting Places". It seems that HS2 Ltd and its contractors are doing neither. Just before Christmas, HS2 Ltd presented some of my constituents with the gift of a notice of entry declaring that it would be entering their homes to install movement monitoring apparatus. I am sure Members can imagine how distressing it was when my constituents were then unable to contact HS2 Ltd for weeks to understand what that meant in practice.

Separately, a parish council was shocked to learn that its local children's play area and duck pond were subject to a notice of temporary possession. It was later clarified that that was just a precaution, but it is precisely this lack of clarity in communications that causes unnecessary distress. HS2 Ltd is failing to communicate transparently, exacerbating the already strained relationship with communities, who feel they are having this project imposed on them. HS2 Ltd is treating its interactions with people and the environment like a tick-box exercise, doing no more than meeting minimum requirements. I hope that the Government will be able to exercise some influence over it and encourage it to meet not just the letter, but the spirit of the commitments it made to those along the line of the route.

I will close by mentioning the astounding generosity of the people of Chesham and Amersham. Since the crisis in Ukraine began, I have received an outpouring of emails from constituents asking how they can help. Some have more personal links and have been looking for my help in bringing family fleeing Ukraine to their homes in Buckinghamshire. I am pleased to share that some of these families have been safely reunited. Unfortunately, others are still stranded in Ukraine or bordering countries. One constituent of mine flew to Romania on 7 March to join his Ukrainian sister-in-law and nephews, who had fled their home country. After applying for their visas on 10 March, I am sorry to say that due to a number of delays in processing their applications, three weeks later they are still stuck there. I appreciate the huge amount of pressure currently on the Home Office and those helping, and I understand the safeguarding issues when it comes to children, but I am disappointed that it is taking so long. That is not an isolated case, and the third thing I put to the Minister is that I hope the Government will continue to improve and speed up the process throughout recess. That is desperately needed.

That said, I must thank the many people of Chesham and Amersham for their efforts to help the people of Ukraine, from those wanting to provide shelter to year 6 at Little Chalfont Primary School, who held a bake sale to raise funds. It shows that we truly are a generous and

compassionate community, and it is a privilege to represent them in this House. I take this opportunity to wish all Members a happy Easter and a restful recess.

3.43 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Reflecting on what was said at the start of this debate about the impact of the great Sir David Amess, I take this opportunity to make my contribution as local as it can be. In that regard, I want to transport Members to the beating heart of this country, the Black Country. It is great to see the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) in her place, because she will know the efforts I have taken to educate civil servants about the difference between the Black Country and Birmingham. Perhaps one ask I have of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is that it becomes part of civil service training to understand the differences between the Black Country and Birmingham. Perhaps he could ensure, using his good offices, that as part of that standard training manual for new Ministers and civil servants, particularly permanent secretaries, they understand that, as we say, "The Black Country ain't Birmingham."

I take this opportunity to talk about the communities I represent in Wednesbury, Great Bridge, Princes End, Tipton Green, Tividale and Oldbury. I will try, in the spirit of Sir David, to include as much as I can locally in my contribution. Let us get started with Tipton. I need to raise with my right hon. Friend the issue of the residents of Thomas Cox Wharf and Alexandra Grange, a new development built by Mar City and Aurora Living. This development has been left with roads not resurfaced and pavements not done, and the builder and developer have now gone into liquidation. This means that the remedial works that should have been done and the moneys that should have been recovered through section 106 agreements with the local authority have not happened. I have now worked with two Housing Ministers to try to get this resolved. We have made some progress, particularly on the Alexandra Grange development, in getting some of the work done, but it is clearly not right that my constituents in Tipton are having to put up with their estate not being completed in the way they would have expected. As a result, they are unable to sell their home in many cases, so they feel trapped. I hope my right hon. Friend can encourage the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to engage further and to see what we can do with Sandwell Council. I pay tribute to officers at Sandwell Council who have been practical in their work with me to try to resolve this issue.

Flooding has also been a big issue in Tipton. There were issues in Cotterills Road and Locarno Road, where I helped to move people's damaged goods out of their property following flash flooding. Thanks to a lot of negotiation, we managed to get £80,000 from the Government for flood defences in Tipton. I am pleased to say that residents will now hopefully see the benefit of investment in Tipton, an area to which I feel very close. It was harrowing to see the impact of that flooding on my constituents.

Sticking with Tipton, I must mention the A461 or, as we know it, Great Bridge island, which is a nightmare. My constituency office is located in Great Bridge, which is a mile and a half from my home. It is a 45-minute

drive in rush hour because of congestion on Great Bridge island. I have campaigned to get remedial work done for a year and a half, and my constituents want to see traffic lights on the island. I implore my right hon. Friend to advise me on the best way to start lobbying to get the money through so that people in Great Bridge can commute to and from work.

Princes End has a vibrant high street, but it needs more. I implore my right hon. Friend to give his ministerial colleagues a nudge to ensure that some levelling-up funding comes to Princes End, which is one of the most deprived wards in the west midlands.

Sandwell Council has done great work on the “cracker,” which is a fantastic green space in Princes End, to ensure it is kept clean and available. Can my right hon. Friend reaffirm that we will work to protect the very small amount of green space in urban areas such as mine in the Black Country? I am sure he is aware of the controversial Black Country plan and the issues it has presented for green spaces across the Black Country.

We are fortunate to have a heritage action zone in Wednesbury that has seen our fantastic clock tower, which is nearly 100 years old, get £1.6 million of investment. I welcome that money.

Surprisingly, after 20 years of no movement, there has suddenly been movement on Wednesbury’s health centre in the past two years. It is amazing what happens with a change of personnel. We need to make sure that that follows through, and I implore my right hon. Friend to advise me on how we can ensure that the Government work with local stakeholders to deliver that much-needed addition to local health infrastructure for people in Wednesbury and nearby Darlaston so that they have the access to primary care they need.

Will my right hon. Friend assure my constituents, particularly market traders in Wednesbury, that the Government are listening to market traders and market stallholders? They are still a key part of our local economy, and Wednesbury is a proud market town. We have to ensure that it keeps that heritage.

Antisocial behaviour has been a big issue in Wednesbury and West Bromwich. Hill Top in my constituency has recently had massive issues with antisocial behaviour, and I am working with Vijay Gaddu, a local campaigner, to ensure that we tackle it. I am also working with local stakeholders such as the fantastic Rev. Mark Wilson from St James and St Paul’s Church in Hill Top to ensure we get it under control. I hope my right hon. Friend has some words for campaigners like Vijay and Mark to ensure we tackle antisocial behaviour. Equally, we need to get a grip on the parking issues around Wednesbury.

I am conscious that I am cantering through my speech, but I want to make sure I say as much as I can. Family hubs are important. Harvills Hawthorn Primary School in my constituency has campaigned hard for a family hub, and the Harvills Hawthorn estate is an area of real deprivation. The school’s headteacher has done fantastic work with children aged four, five and six years old who are struggling with verbal communication skills and with basic needs, and they are also working with their parents. They need that extra support.

It was great to see the Government’s commitment to family hubs, but we need to ensure that areas such as Harvills Hawthorn get that support. I appreciate that this is a bit of a shopping list for my right hon. Friend—

unfortunately, these debates are like that—but I hope that he or one of his ministerial colleagues could meet me to discuss the importance of a family hub there, because it is a key part of ensuring that the levelling-up agenda, which is vital for my constituents, particularly young people at the start of their lives, gets through. I was impressed by the young people at Harvills Hawthorn.

We are going up the bonk now, as we would say where I am from, because residents in Tividale are equally dealing with horrendous issues around antisocial behaviour, particularly on new build estates and with management companies that do not appear to be following through. In my right hon. Friend’s discussions with ministerial colleagues, I ask him to keep the pressure on to ensure that those who pay management fees, particularly freeholders, get what they are paying for.

In particular, there is a long-standing issue about a gate on the Speakers Close estate in Tividale. It is a prime example of where residents know the need to tackle antisocial behaviour and they have the solution but they cannot break down the barriers in their way. Residents have come to me about it because councillors and management companies have let them down, so I needed to raise the issue on the Floor of the House.

I have tried to canter through as much as I can and to keep hon. Members’ attention, which I hope I have, in a short space of time. I will say that the last couple of years have been tumultuous in Sandwell. We have seen in the press the issues that we have had with the local authority and commissioners coming through, and we have seen some of the other issues that we have had as well, but I want to touch on the good things, such as the fantastic community in Sandwell. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree, as he came to Sandwell recently to visit me and my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards), and I am sure he saw first hand the great community that we have.

That is nowhere more true than for the residents of Walker Grange care home in Tipton, who reminded me why I am here. Walker Grange’s oldest resident is 102 years old and it has been her home for 30 years. It was under threat of closure as the council was absolutely determined to close it; I raised that with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the time. Through the sheer determination of the residents and their families, they kept that care home open, and not just that—they secured the £1-million investment that they needed to upgrade it. That resident said to me that it was her life and she could not see herself carrying on living if she did not live with the family that she had built there. That proved to me that the communities of the Black Country, as we would say, “Them bostin” and they make me so proud to be their Member of Parliament.

I take the opportunity on our Adjournment to wish everyone, including House staff, you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and hon. Members on both sides of the House, a restful recess—even though I do not think it will be restful for many of us. I say to my constituents that I am proud to be their Member of Parliament and I hope that my right hon. Friend will have picked up the shopping list that I have given him on their behalf.

3.52 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey), who does have

[*Dame Meg Hillier*]

to educate certain senior figures in the civil service about where and what the Black Country is, but that has given them a very good indication. My word to them is that if they mug up on those sorts of things, I am not sure that he will give them an easier ride at the Public Accounts Committee, but it might mean that they have a slightly smoother route through and certainly fewer demands for visits to the Black Country as a result, although I am sure they are always pleased to visit.

I declare an interest that I am a leaseholder of a building with cladding, although I am not being required to pay for its replacement thanks to the developer stepping up, and I am the landlord of a private rented property. Today I will talk about housing, homelessness and all the housing issues in Hackney. Everybody in Hackney has a different housing issue; we have a huge range of challenges that are different for different sectors.

Homelessness and overcrowding are immense in my constituency. We often talk here, particularly at the moment, about the cost of living, but the real cost for many of my constituents is that they do not have a stable home to live in. As of June 2020, we had more than 8,000 households in temporary accommodation, which accounts for roughly one in 35 residents in the borough. The expenditure on temporary accommodation has increasingly gone up.

Families are now typically living in hostels for three years or more. During lockdown, in fact, a woman was living in one with her seven-year-old daughter and was working while her daughter was home-schooling in the same room. That was not uncommon. Those who are lucky enough to have access to a council tenancy or a private temporary tenancy are often living in very overcrowded conditions. In council properties, often one family lives in the living room and another in the bedroom. Families with many children often live in a one-bedroom flat or, as in the case of a woman I spoke to the other day, her four children have bunk beds in one bedroom and she sleeps in the living room. This is a real challenge. We talk about levelling up and there is also talk about the covid divide, with many communities or individuals being in even more difficult circumstances than others, but this is endemic. I have seen families with toddlers who have grown into teenagers and young adults while they have been unable to move out.

Young adults are not able to start in their own home, and why not? Because even if they could find somewhere to rent privately, the rent levels in the private rented sector are enormously high. As of September last year, the median monthly rent in Hackney is £1,600, but for a one-bedroom apartment it is £1,350 a month and for a three-bedroom apartment it is £2,220 a month. That is completely out of the reach of most working people, and even well-paid key workers struggle on that basis. This is causing a crisis for families, but also for many of our services because people have to travel a long way in to work, particularly in our schools and our health service. There really is no prospect for them, and there is no prospect for those in overcrowded social housing of moving in.

I welcome the fact that the Government are looking at changing some of the rules for renting privately, because as well as the barriers of cost, there are huge

barriers for those who rent privately. More people rent privately in Hackney than live in their own owned housing, and more people rent in social housing than both of those combined. The private rented sector is growing and significant, and those people have very few rights. Recently, the Public Accounts Committee looked into this and, frankly, it is a dog's breakfast. It is good that the Government are looking at this, but there is a lot of hope out there, and I wait to see what the Government will deliver to make sure that tenants have far more rights, better rights and easier routes to redress. For many tenants, the idea of taking their landlord to court and going through such a process is too costly and time-consuming, and many people do not even get past the first hurdle. It is important that landlords remember that they are in the business of letting homes, and it is the homes bit that is too often forgotten.

There are serious concerns about house prices in Hackney South and Shoreditch, as well as in Hackney as a whole, and indeed in London. It is now pretty much impossible for anyone on the average wage to buy. A typical two-bedroom modern flat will be marketed at £750,000. I should perhaps repeat that for those who think I may have slipped a nought into the wrong place: £750,000. I suspect that that would buy someone significantly more in the Black Country. It means that even rich MPs would struggle to get on the housing ladder, and it is impossible—it is out of the reach—for those living in overcrowded housing or the private renters who want to put down roots.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful speech. Does she agree that at the root of all the problems she has mentioned—the extraordinary levels of overcrowding we are seeing, with even very disabled children growing up in totally unsuitable properties—is the failure to build social housing, and there is nothing about that in the current Government proposals? They have proposals on social housing, but nothing to increase the stock significantly, and that is the only way we are going to build affordable properties for the people she is talking about.

Dame Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am proud of the fact that, under the current Mayor of London, we have seen 11,000 council housing and social housing starts, and the mayor of Hackney has made it a key priority. However, for pretty much every council house built, authorities have to build a private house for sale at the rates I have mentioned in order to cross-subsidise. This crisis has been looming for some time, but it is just getting worse, and we do need to see more supply. Every Budget—when we see the Chancellor at the Dispatch Box—fuels house prices, which one could say is a dividend for homeowners, but it is absolutely terrible for those trying to get out of private renting and get on to the ladder or for those who need that social housing so desperately. This is a really serious concern, and we need to see a big step change on this issue.

The other big housing issue is of course cladding. We have at least 93 buildings in Hackney classed as high risk for cladding, but many more with small amounts of cladding need their wretched EWS1 form, and this is proving really difficult. We have so many families who need to move because of the size of their family but who cannot do so because they cannot sell. I recently

met a group of residents who have had to move for their job, but they have had to let their property. Although the Government keep making promises about support for leaseholders, they are now saying that they will not help those landlords. However, they are landlords because they could not sell, not because they chose to be. There may be differences between such landlords and investment landlords, but that is a real concern. It was their home that they wanted to live in, and they just cannot sell it because of the EWS1 form and the cladding.

I keep getting constituents writing to me saying, “The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities promised that we would not have to pay a penny.” All power to the Secretary of State’s elbow to get developers to pay and to get the problem sorted out, but we need to see the concrete proposals on how that will happen, because, at the moment, leaseholders are still on the hook and still cannot sell their properties. Their lives are on hold while they are forking out huge amounts of money on extra insurance, and some still on waking watch—that is still happening. One developer told me recently that, for one development alone, the insurance premium has gone up from £50,000 to £400,000 a year. Those are enormous costs for ordinary people, not all of whom are wealthy; indeed, many live in shared ownership accommodation but are caught in leasehold properties.

Finally, I turn to the Metropolitan police, where we have seen a horrendous set of issues in the last few months and year. Child Q is a Hackney child, and she was degraded by the experience she had to suffer. However, it is not just about Child Q; there is a wider set of issues, including misogyny at Charing Cross police station. There is a culture issue in the Met. We have an opportunity—I look to the Minister on this—because the Home Secretary along with the Mayor of London will appoint the new commissioner of the Metropolitan police. We need somebody who can drive that culture change through and, dare I say, consider whether they might split the Metropolitan police by separating the counter-terrorism function from the day-to-day policing of London. It has got too big—it has grown like Topsy—and that is one of the contributing factors.

I cannot express enough to the Minister how triggering the treatment of Child Q has been, particularly but not only to black women in my constituency—black men, too—who have gone through real difficulties and had terrible handling by the police back in the day, and their children are still being stopped and searched far more often than their white counterparts. The anger is palpable and the hurt is real. Much more needs to be done in the short term. Perhaps we need to introduce proper training into our schools on people’s rights when they are stopped by a police officer. We have policing by consent, but we need to equip our young people so that they know what consent they have given and that they can acquiesce politely while knowing their rights and that the Met should treat them politely, too. We need strong, new leadership—all power to the elbows of those recruiting that—to change the culture in the Met, and that needs to happen now.

4.2 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): May I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as well as Mr Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker, the other Madam Deputy Speaker

and the whole House a happy and peaceful recess? Like other hon. Members, I will raise a few outstanding issues.

In the last few months, I have been in correspondence with the Department for Work and Pensions, trying to ensure that those held on remand but not subsequently charged do not lose their benefits. That is what the rules say, but a lack of proper guidance for DWP staff means that I have ended up with several constituents who have lost their benefits or been wrongly transferred to universal credit. The Leader of the House may know that once someone has been inadvertently transferred to universal credit, there is no way back. I was promised a meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), on 13 January, and I hope that the Leader of the House will take the message back that I would still very much like that meeting.

While I do not want to make prolonged correspondence the theme of my remarks, I turn to the seasonal agricultural worker scheme, about which I first wrote to the Government in April last year. North East Fife is famous for many things, and its soft fruit and agriculture is part of that. I am sure that the Leader of the House, given his other vocation, is aware of that. However, there is no doubt that the labour shortages that we have experienced since the UK left the EU have put farms in my constituency under significant strain.

Last year, the additional contractors appointed to administer the scheme were appointed too late for the season in Scotland, so, by the time additional contractors came into place, the jobs were gone and the work was already happening. I am keen for that not to happen again, but I am concerned that it is. A food security debate is ongoing in Westminster Hall, and ensuring food security is becoming ever more critical. There are not enough placements under the seasonal agricultural worker scheme, associated costs are too high and guidance changes—sometimes it feels like it is changing as we speak—so farmers cannot prepare. Nobody is saying that people in the sector should not have good wages, but the minimum wage requirements that have been put in place for migrant workers are higher than the national living wage. Those farmers have already made price decisions and worked with their supply chains, and they are now being asked to absorb the additional costs. Squeezed farmers are already struggling and that will only put further pressure on food prices for our constituents.

I was grateful to meet Lord Offord from the Scotland Office about that issue. I was hoping that there would be a roundtable and further discussions with the Home Office. The Scottish Affairs Committee visited Perthshire and Tayside at the beginning of this month to look, particularly, at the issue of horticulture, as part of a short inquiry. We wrote to the Home Office two weeks ago to express serious concerns. We all want food on our tables rather than rotting in the fields. We want affordable food as well as support for our families, and we need to ensure that schemes are made fit for purpose as a matter of urgency. I am concerned about what this means for North East Fife.

To follow on from the comments from the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), I notify the House that I have written to the Home Secretary this week to raise my concerns about the appointment of Sir Stephen House as the

[Wendy Chamberlain]

acting Metropolitan Police Commissioner. Hon. Members may wonder why the MP for North East Fife is concerned about that, but those who have heard me speak in the Chamber know of my background as a police officer. I served in Lothian and Borders police until 2011, but someone does not have to have been in the police in Scotland to understand the legacy that Sir Stephen House left behind in the national police force and Police Scotland. That included the decision to allow armed officers to attend routine incidents, stop and search for juveniles and changes to the call handling system in the new national force, where routine failures led to a woman being left in her car for three days following a crash and subsequently dying. I have to mention the continuous and excellent work that my colleague in the Scottish Parliament, Willie Rennie—the MSP for North East Fife—did with the Bell family in that regard.

I am very concerned, because Sir Stephen was deemed not fit to lead Scotland's police force in 2015, which was when he retired, and I ask why, even on a temporary basis, he has been considered fit to lead the UK's largest force. I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch about the recruitment process for the new commissioner and I hope that that is done as soon as possible. Sir Stephen has been Dame Cressida's deputy for the past few years and we have all been in this Chamber too many times listening to the Minister for Crime and Policing responding to issues in the Metropolitan police. I hope that the Home Secretary moves that recruitment process forward quickly.

I will end on a positive note, with an odd declaration of interest: as a result of being the MP for North East Fife, I sit on the board of trustees for the St Andrews Links trust, which runs all the golf courses in St Andrews, so I am usually a popular person at certain times of the year. I am delighted to say that the 150th Open will be coming to St Andrews in July, and I do so because, when we get to the next Adjournment debate before the summer recess—I am delighted that that debate will be named after Sir David Amess; it sounds like a very fitting tribute—the Open will have taken place. It is appropriate to mention that because I have raised support for golf, support for golf tourism and St Andrews throughout my time here, and I very much hope that Members across the House who would like to come to St Andrews this July to celebrate that international sporting event will be in a position to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Put me down for two tickets, please.

4.8 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is the nature of our job as MPs that we deal with some shocking events and grave injustices. Perhaps that makes us a bit case-hardened, but something happened in my constituency last week that really did shock me. The easiest way to introduce the subject may be to read a short article that was published in a local newspaper, the *Brent & Kilburn Times*, two days ago. It stated:

"The Pentecostal City Mission Church in Willesden has been evicted by a developer.

Fruition Properties evicted the church on Scrubs Lane without warning on Wednesday, March 23. The developers entered the

building at 7.30 am and changed the locks, leaving parents unable to drop off their children at the nursery and staff unable to retrieve personal belongings.

The Mission is a registered community asset and operates a nursery, foodbank, dementia care and other local community services.

Fruition sought planning permission in 2018 to knock down the church and build a mixed-use, 20-storey development. This would include 85 'residential units', a cafe or restaurant, a retail space, nursery and place of worship. A condition of its approval was...the secure replacement space for the church and associated services as part of the new development.

The mayor's Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation is the local planning authority, as the property is part of a strategic development site."

The article quotes Rev. Des Hall, who runs Pentecostal City Mission church:

"We are shocked and saddened that Fruition took possession of this beloved church and vital lifeline for so many community members."

It quotes me as saying:

"It's unacceptable and quite frankly unbelievable news to hear that a developer has evicted a church, nursery and foodbank at a time where so many families are under financial strain to put food on the table. I have made my position to Fruition abundantly clear on numerous occasions and they have refused to meet to reach a solution, despite the planning policy clearly requiring provision for the church."

It then quotes the spokesperson for the developer:

"We have been in discussions with the church for over two years regarding leases, occupational rights and either late or non-payment of occupational charges, even at a reduced rent. We regret the current situation, but we have been unable to come to a mutually acceptable agreement on how to move forward together."

Let me say a little more about the church, which is a real institution in what is an extremely poor and deprived area. It has been there for more than 20 years. About 13 or 14 years ago, something quite miraculous happened: with a very large grant from EU structural funds and a smaller bank loan, the church was able to build what is now an extremely impressive building on a very prominent site on the corner of Scrubs Lane and the Harrow Road, providing all the services that hon. Members have just heard about. It serves communities in Harlesden, Willesden, College Park, Old Oak, North Ken and East Acton, including some of the poorest communities in London and indeed in the country. It is one of very few community services there; it is an extremely impressive show.

The front of the building is in my constituency, but the rear is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who opened the building 13 or 14 years ago; hon. Members will not be surprised to hear that she is much better at doing that. We are all thinking of her, because of the very sad announcement that she made earlier this week about her struggle—her successful struggle, I think—with breast cancer. She would otherwise have been with me, the congregation and the food bank last Friday, when we were out on the street because we could not get access to what was going on inside the church.

The development corporation is an extremely impressive and major project that includes the HS2 site, the largest rail construction site, Crossrail, and Park Royal, the largest industrial estate in Europe. It is busy trying to get on with redeveloping and regenerating the area under the guidance of the Mayor, but of course that attracts developers. Fruition Properties came along and bought the site, over the church's head, from the bank

that had taken possession of it some years ago. It then applied for planning permission to build a large block of mainly luxury flats on the site.

There are disputes—I will not go into them, because we do not have time and it is not necessary—about how the church will be rehoused and what will happen while the development goes on. A court date was set for 7 June, so although things had clearly broken down, there was no rush to judgment. Indeed, before Christmas, I could see that matters were not going well, so I convened a meeting with the developer and the development corporation and we discussed matters. The developer—a guy called Mani Khiroya, the chief executive officer of Fruition—said “I will go away and talk to the church,” and they had a meeting. I saw the requests that the church made, which were entirely reasonable.

At that point, however, the developer said, “No, we are not going any further.” On 25 January, he sent me a letter saying:

“we have made the extremely difficult decision to ask Pentecostal City Mission Church to leave our building on Scrubs Lane...I will contact your office to arrange a meeting to discuss the above”.

He did not, so I wrote to him on 8 February asking for a meeting, but I heard nothing back. Again, there did not appear to be any particular hurry, because we had a court date coming up in June. Then, without any notice at all, private security guards went into the building early in the morning, asked the caretaker and cleaner to leave the building, and changed the locks. Everybody was locked out with all their possessions and belongings inside. As we have heard, children were turning up to go to the nursery on the site. I have met some pretty poor developers in my time, but this one really does take the biscuit.

Where does that leave us now? Well, it leaves us with a substantial coalition of people who have come together to fight what the developer is trying to do. They include representatives of the media: the BBC and ITV London came to the site last week, along with the local press, and I am pleased to say that the property press are taking an interest. Many local residents’ groups and associations with expertise are also involved, including College Park Neighbourhood “CONGA”. Julie McBride and Nick Pole have been there. Henry Peterson of the St Quintin and Woodlands neighbourhood forum is giving substantial support, as are the Old Oak neighbourhood forum and the Grand Union Alliance.

We will be in court quite soon. Lawyers are preparing for an injunction to allow re-entry. We have support from all the local politicians, including the leaders of both councils, Stephen Cowan and Mo Butt, and councillors including Wesley Harcourt and Alex Sanderson, and Matt Kelcher in Brent, and of course my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central. We have had great support from the development corporation, which is now providing funds to keep the services going, and we are finding temporary homes for them as well. I particularly praise David Lunts, the chief executive.

I would like to see the Government join that coalition, because I cannot see any difference between what Fruition has done and what P&O has done. This is predatory capitalism. Fruition is victimising people simply because it can, thinking that it can get away with it. I will ensure that my remarks, and what is happening on the site, are well known to all the planning authorities, all the investors, and everyone on whose sites Fruition is looking to

develop in the future, because no one should have anything to do with this organisation until such time as it modifies its behaviour.

Let me end with a quotation from someone who uses the church’s food bank. The Rev. Des Hall will be there tomorrow; it will be freezing cold again, but he will be out in the street with his wife, his volunteers, his congregation, and the supporters who will feed—as they do every week—hundreds of people who queue all the way down Scrubs Lane. He will be there, but he will not be able to get into his church because the developer has locked him out. One of the people who use the food bank said this:

“I go there for food because my family is shielding. It’s a blessing. They do different breads, fruit and vegetables, cheese and potatoes.

It would be a shame if this happened to the church. I’ve never seen one that does so much for people so I always support it. It’s a poor neighbourhood but everyone helps one another.

It would be a shame if this happened to the church. There will be nowhere for these people to go.”

It is an outrage that this should be happening in our country in the 21st century. Something has to be done to stop behaviour of this kind. Something has to be done to reward those who are simply trying to provide decent services for those in most need. This is naked greed and opportunism, and I hope that when we are in court it will be shown to be an illegal act as well. I wish Des and his congregation all the best. I want to see them back in their church as soon as possible, continuing to do what they have done for many decades—serve my constituents, and the people of neighbouring constituencies.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. The winding-up speeches will start at 4.30. There are two Members left to speak, and I am sure they can divide the time between themselves. First, I call Fleur Anderson.

4.18 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this end-of-term debate and to raise several issues that are important to constituents in Putney, Southfields and Roehampton. My dilemma is always which ones to choose, but I have picked five issues. I will be talking about the Fulham pier proposal, wet wipes, cladding, mould and the employment Bill.

To start with, there is the future of the Putney boat race, which is back this weekend. You are very welcome to come along, Mr Deputy Speaker, as are all Members. We are welcoming everyone back to Putney after two years away because of covid, but the future of the Putney boat race on the Thames and all the sports engaged in by the river clubs on the embankment is being put at risk by Fulham football club’s proposal to build an 80 metre pier out into the river. The pier would have a Clipper ferry stop, and those ferries would make sports such as rowing and sailing on the river too dangerous, especially for all the young people who use it. About 4,000 members across 41 clubs along the river would be impacted. Those 4,000 members use this stretch of the river on average about twice a week. There are also around 30,000 participants in rowing races in the first quarter of the year. Approximately 1,400 children from clubs and rowing centres near Fulham football club use that part of the river several times a week.

Bob Stewart: I cannot see how building an 80 metre pier into the Thames could be allowed to happen, in planning terms, because the river is used so much there, particularly for rowing—it is wonderful!

Fleur Anderson: I very much thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I ask him please to join the campaign; we have a petition he can sign. He is not alone in being incredulous about how this could be allowed to go ahead.

We had a public meeting about this last week, and I hope that Fulham football club will see the opposition from so many different clubs, and from the boat race itself. I hope the football club will listen to all those clubs and stop its plans to build this huge dangerous pier out into the river. I also hope the Minister can take this up with Ministers in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport so that we can talk about this and secure the future of the boat race.

My second issue is wet wipes. My campaign to ban plastic in wet wipes continues. The consultation that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs launched into commonly littered single-use plastic items—not the most snappy title for a consultation, but it had a huge amount of take-up because a lot of people support this campaign—has now closed. I am told that Ministers will be picking the issue up after Easter and consolidating the results for consultation. I look forward to seeing the options that are put to the Government and to continuing to work with DEFRA Ministers on this.

I want to offer my support and co-operation on moving forward to secondary legislation to establish a firm and reasonable date by which the consumer wet wipe industry needs to phase out the use of plastic wet wipe products. I want to praise Tesco, Aldi and Sainsbury's for making the move in recent months to selling only plastic-free wet wipes. I hope this is just the start and that other companies will follow suit. There are many issues to be ironed out within the legislation, but I hope that progress will continue to be made with urgency towards banning plastic in wet wipes once and for all.

My campaign on cladding continues. I know that this has been raised by other Members, but it is a highly contentious issue across Putney, Southfields and Roehampton, where I have been supporting nearly 30 affected blocks for the past two years as leaseholders and residents face both physical and financial threats to their very existence. The Government finally seem to be listening to us on this issue, and I hope they come good on their promise to include legal protection for leaseholders against any fire safety costs in the Building Safety Bill when it returns from the other place.

I was hoping that by now we would have heard the results of the Secretary of State's discussions with developers. We were promised this by Easter, but we have yet to hear anything and Easter is upon us. My constituents are incredibly anxious about this, but they are hopeful. However, there are some areas that are still not covered: buildings under 11 metres are not covered by any of the support measures; there is no Government funding for non-cladding defects; not all types of cladding are being funded or deemed eligible; and the building safety fund application and approval process is still painfully slow. Some blocks have been waiting 18 months to hear news.

It is not clear which developers are involved in the discussions and negotiations with Ministers. In some developments, the developers have gone bankrupt and might not be involved in the discussions. Will those developments be included? Waking watch costs are still having to be met, along with insurance premium hikes. In some cases in Putney, there have been increases in insurance costs of over 500%. These costs alone are bankrupting some residents, who then cannot move, whether or not the cladding remuneration is fully funded. I hope that the Secretary of State will consider all these points when the Bill returns after Easter.

I have another housing issue in my constituency that really concerns me. Sometimes when I visit residents, they open the door and I can smell the impact of mould coming through. Those houses are not fit to live in. They are not habitable, and this is causing a real health hazard for many families across my constituency. However, when they report it to Wandsworth Council, they are too often told that it is a lifestyle issue. I cannot imagine a lifestyle that involves living with mould so serious that children are getting asthma. The problem is not being addressed, and that is why I want to raise it. If I had my way, I would have a Minister for mould and we would sort this problem out once and for all, because no family should have to live with it.

Lastly, I want to raise the long-forgotten employment Bill. Employment rights and secure employment are vital not only in my constituency but across the country. I was very pleased to hold a Roehampton jobs fair, but I want to see the employment Bill come to this House. In the 2019 Queen's Speech, the Government promised workers an employment Bill to improve workers' rights as the UK leaves the EU, making Britain

"the best place in the world to work".

The Bill was supposed to

"Promote fairness in the workplace, striking the right balance between the flexibility that the economy needs and the security that workers deserve...Strengthen workers' ability to get redress for poor treatment by creating a new, single enforcement body...Offer greater protections for workers by prioritising fairness in the workplace, and introduce better support for working families...Build on existing employment law with measures that protect those in low-paid work and the gig economy."

I think we can all agree that all that is very much needed, but there has been no sign of the employment Bill, just a string of broken promises. In June 2021, the Government announced that they would introduce a new, single enforcement body, but they did not say when. In September 2021, the Government announced that there would be a new statutory code of practice to make it unlawful not to pass on tips to workers in full. Some additional childcare funding was announced in last year's autumn Budget statement, but not the £1 billion promised. The Government also reneged on their promise to reform sick pay, abandoning the insecure workers who are most likely to be refused sick pay or who are entitled to such a miserable sum that they cannot afford to stay away from work. That is very much linked to our long covid debate earlier.

The question remains: where is the much anticipated employment Bill that we were promised? I hope that the Leader of the House will have some good news. Was it just an empty promise? Will we see it in May? Working people in my constituency desperately want to know.

I will finish by wishing everyone a happy Easter.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): To resume his seat at 4.30, I call Richard Burgon.

4.27 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I wish to speak on this matter while it is not sub judice. Julian Assange is currently being held at Her Majesty's prison Belmarsh, a high-security prison, and has been for nearly three years. He is being held there on remand not for any violations of UK law, but solely because he faces extradition to the USA for his journalistic work with WikiLeaks. He is a political prisoner and I want to put on the record that a cross-party group of parliamentarians have been repeatedly refused even an online video meeting with Julian Assange.

He has pursued journalistic work that has exposed atrocities committed in the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well human rights abuses committed in Guantanamo Bay. Much of the horrific details that we now know of those events were exposed by Julian Assange's journalism, and for that we should be grateful.

That journalism was carried out in our country. He was invited here by *The Guardian*, which along with *The New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde* and *El País*—some of the biggest news outlets in the world—was among the first five news organisations to publish articles based on his work. It is journalism for which he has received numerous awards. Yet now he faces extradition to the US and a prison sentence of up to 175 years in a super-maximum security prison.

Civil liberties groups and leading newsrooms view the US Government's prosecution against Assange with deep alarm. Amnesty International has said:

"Prosecuting Julian Assange on these charges could have a chilling effect on the right to freedom of expression".

The secretary-general of Amnesty International labelled it, "Politically motivated and unjustified", and said that the case

"undermines press freedom, the rule of law, and the prohibition of torture."

Reporters Without Borders, the International Federation of Journalists and press freedom groups Article 19, Index on Censorship and the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, as well as the National Union of Journalists, issued a joint declaration stating:

"Julian Assange...is being prosecuted for exposing US rendition, unlawful killings and the subversion of the judiciary. And the UK government is allowing extradition proceedings to continue.

The prosecution of Julian Assange was a political decision taken by the Trump administration" and it

"creates a dangerous legal precedent, allowing any journalist in Britain to be prosecuted and extradited.

Our government must ensure the UK is a safe place for journalists and publishers to work. Whilst Julian Assange remains in prison facing extradition, it is not."

The Washington Post's executive editor said that it was "criminalising common practices in journalism that have long served the public interest."

President Biden was there as part of Obama's Administration when the decision was taken not to prosecute Julian Assange. The message that I have is that that should be the position. If that does not happen, I call on the Home Secretary to use her powers and refuse to sign an extradition warrant.

4.30 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The Tory cost of living crisis is the most salient issue for voters, including those in my constituency, superseding covid during the height of the pandemic. *The Sunday Times* reported recently that Tory Spads and staffers were told that the cost of living crisis was now the public's primary concern, and that private polling showed that the issue had eclipsed healthcare. One source present said that the issue had "shot up" the polling graph faster than any other in recent years, noting that even the pandemic had not prompted the same reaction. A source added:

"The cost of living issue is a train about to hit us."

Folk in my constituency, many parts of which are areas of deprivation, know all about poverty and the cost of living. Almost seven years ago, when I was first elected, I set up a poverty action network, which I thought would be a reasonably short-term thing. PAN sounds really posh—if the Chairman of Ways and Means had still been in the Chair I would have said that it was not pan loaf, but more square slice; she would know what I was talking about—but it is not posh. It is about organisations locally helping people in poverty who are struggling. We know that one of the biggest issues for people living in poverty is their mental health. I am going to take this opportunity to thank the organisations that for almost seven years have attended the poverty action network. Lanarkshire Links supports mental health services and helps folk to get through the bureaucracy and get the help they need. Scottish Association for Mental Health also comes, as does Lanarkshire Association for Mental Health, which has recently opened a lovely café in Wishaw, where people can get a really good cup of tea and a nice meal, and do yoga. I plan to use some of those facilities during recess—no pictures, please.

Other organisations in the network such as MADE4U IN ML2, which is the postcode for Wishaw, are in the middle of the community. So are the Orbiston Neighbourhood Centre and a number of the local churches, such as Motherwell Baptist Church and Dalziel St Andrew's Parish Church in Motherwell, which has a befriending service. The Centre Point organisations are in two of the most deprived areas, Gowkthrapple and Forgewood. These organisations are all run by volunteers, and all they want to do is help their local communities. They helped their communities to get through the pandemic, and they want them to prosper and be in better health.

I worry about my communities, because the cost of energy and food will be far too much for many of them. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) talked about a local church that went out and fed people, and my local churches also do that. South Wishaw Parish Church has taken over a community food bank. I have been told by a Minister that they were amazed at the generosity of local people, who were themselves in straitened circumstances but wanted to help others. That church also runs a New Life Recovery Hub, helping addicts.

Other organisations that help are also part of the network. The Miracle Foundation was set up by a local young woman whose nieces and nephews had suffered bereavement when their mother died, and there were no services to help them. She now goes across Wishaw,

[*Marion Fellows*]

Motherwell and right across central Scotland helping young people; I have nothing but admiration for these people. They give up their lives, they spend their money and they just want to help. Friends & Families Affected by Murder & Suicide, and Chris's House help victims and families who have suffered huge loss and bereavement in awful circumstances. Motherwell football club has a community trust, and Motherwell is a real community football team. It helps with education and with wellbeing; it is just everywhere. I am very proud to be the MP who represents Motherwell and Wishaw.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is democratic as well.

Marion Fellows: Yes, the club is owned by the fans, and I absolutely take that point.

I am trying to rush through this, because others wish to speak. The Voice of Experience Forum is a network that introduces folk to other organisations that are doing the same thing. I have found that so many people are trying to help but they do not realise that someone else is already doing that, so this saves them time, money and effort, because people can be passed on to different organisations. Voluntary Action North Lanarkshire comes to see people, and I pay tribute to June Vallance, who retired in September 2021. She was a well-kent figure across North Lanarkshire and a real driving force.

I do not think I have mentioned the Wishaw, Murdostoun and Fortissat Community Forum, which was led for many years by David Summers, who unfortunately died in 2015. His wife Nancy has taken that on and been a leading force in it. We get people from the local Lanarkshire Baby Bank and from a wonderful organisation that comes called Full On. It runs workshops where people with mental health issues are taught how to play a musical instrument to help their mental health and make them feel better. We have autism organisations and the local veterans' association come to us. I know I am going to forget people, because there are just so many good organisations locally. We bring in organisations that talk to people, and one of the ones that comes regularly is Social Security Scotland, which explains to organisations such as Lanarkshire Carers where they can get benefits and what they can apply for, and promises them help to do it. We have In Kind Direct, which is a national organisation, and the Family Fund, which does wonderful work with families with disabled children, and One Parent Families Scotland. My next speaker I hope will be Home Energy Scotland, because it is going to be really needed, as it gives advice on energy, how to save it, how to insulate the home and how to make life better. In the 21st century, in a country as developed as ours, there should not be the need that is being met by these organisations. I am sometimes ashamed that I have to stand here and talk about this. I am proud of the people who do this work, but I am ashamed that they have to do it.

Lastly, may I add my name to the list of those calling for the Sir David Amess—I was going to say “memorial” but that is perhaps a bit too strong—debate. I made my maiden speech in one of these debates, and I was inspired by him. I was inspired many times by the good work that he did.

4.38 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is truly a pleasure to close for the Opposition in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) in her passionate description of the poverty action network in her constituency and of many other vital constituency organisations. May I also at the outset put on record my support for the David Amess debate? I am sure that the whole House is united on that. I also pay tribute to Madam Deputy Speaker, who opened earlier with some remarks about David Amess. We all remember him tenderly on days such as today.

I thank all colleagues from across the whole House for their contributions. It is a mark of our democracy that we make space in our parliamentary timetable for debates in which any and every matter of interest to many or some constituents, or perhaps only just one, may be raised. They are then put on the historical record, preserved forever, not only in the ephemeral online world of *Hansard*, but in the physical notation of our every word. I mention all that because I had the pleasure of visiting the parliamentary archive in this parliamentary Session. I do recommend it. There, one can be inspired by the sight of the original rolls on which legislation—such as that required for our great railways to be built—was recorded. I also saw the minutes of the 1791 Select Committee inquiry into slavery, which made very grim reading. Uplifting or appalling, dramatic or mundane—our every word here is recorded for history. I recommend a visit to the archive to any Member.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) opened the debate, standing in for the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), to whom we send our warmest wishes for his recovery. The hon. Gentleman led off with a fitting tribute to our late colleague Sir David Amess, following the tributes started by Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank him for opening the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) showed us the power of her work as a constituency MP. She is so much a role model for so many of us. I hope the Leader of the House will have heeded her call for the legal remedy that the family of her constituent Lillie Clack so desperately and so rightly seek.

The right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) raised the matter of recognition for the relatives of blue light servicemen and women who are killed in the line of duty, in his customary eloquent and knowledgeable way. He referred in particular to the sacrifice of the family of PC Keith Palmer, who died protecting us. We have thought of him particularly in the past two weeks, given the anniversary of that atrocity.

The Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), spoke with passion and knowledge about the many dreadful consequences of our housing crisis, not only in her constituency but, of course, beyond. I hope the Leader of the House will remember that a renters' reform Bill has been promised by his Government in previous Queen's Speeches. My hon. Friend also reminded us of the struggles of leaseholders not only in her patch but up and down the country,

including in my own patch, Bristol West. Other colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), did the same. Again, I hope the Leader of the House will take note of the representations in this debate for the forthcoming Queen's Speech and beyond.

I turn to another tragedy, of a different sort but perhaps equally calamitous for the people involved. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) spoke of the shocking incident in his constituency in which a developer in effect evicted a church, a nursery and a food bank. I will be thinking of his constituents tomorrow, as they operate the food bank out on the street. That incident should not be allowed to pass.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney managed to raise five important constituency issues—including her brilliant campaign against plastic wet wipes and the boat race—in record time. She also said something about a very long pier that I only dimly understood, but it sounds like a bad idea. I think that was the right way to look at it—

Fleur Anderson *indicated assent.*

Thangam Debbonaire: It is a very bad idea. My hon. Friend did not mention her campaign about Hammersmith bridge, but she did manage to get that in this morning at business questions, and I think the Leader of the House heard her cry then.

Various Members raised important concerns about human rights and some specific constituency matters. I hope that those on the Treasury Bench heard the urging by the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) for Ministers to learn the difference between the Black Country and Birmingham, along with the comments of other Members.

When this Parliament opened with the Queen's Speech on 11 May last year, we were still in the depths of the covid pandemic. Proceedings were necessarily restricted and I was robbed—robbed, I tell you—of the chance to process with the previous Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), so I am looking forward to processing this year with the right hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer). Nevertheless, it is what is in the Queen's Speech that counts, along with what follows it. The lingering legacy of covid could be addressed in the coming Parliament; for instance, by making the covid memorial wall permanent and by making sure that the covid public inquiry takes place with the thoroughness, sensitivity and accountability that it deserves.

At the start of this Parliament, who could have predicted that we would be ending it with a war in Europe—one that has shocked us all and united the House and the country? Many colleagues have mentioned it today, and on many days over the past few weeks, but I for one will never forget the experience of sitting in this place, together with Members of the other place—it felt like the whole country was watching us—as President Zelensky made democratic history by speaking proudly and profoundly on behalf of his invaded country and his people, in this place. I thank the Speaker and all the House staff who made that possible.

Many Members have mentioned the generosity of their constituents in responding to the refugee crisis. I add my voice to theirs and thank my own constituents.

This morning, the Leader of the House, or it may have been the hon. Member for Harrow East, mentioned that we will have the rescheduled debate on COP15. I am pleased about that because, whether it is the devastation of pollinators or the potential microbial offerings of the cryoconite microbial diversity in the Arctic glaciers—[HON. MEMBERS: “Ooh!”] Yes, I have a special interest in the subject: the very first Dr Debbonaire of my parish—a former pupil of the wonderful Cotham School in my patch, which turns out rather marvellous scientists—recently passed her PhD in that very subject. I make no apology for shoehorning in that mention. Cryoconite is a good word to get in, but it does not fit on Wordle, by the way.

As we come to the end of our Session, we thank all the Doorkeepers, the Clerks, the cleaners, the security staff, the researchers, the digital staff and the maintenance staff. I make particular mention of the catering staff who have expanded not just my waistline but the options for vegans, which many of you carnivores appear to be devouring as well, because occasionally I have not managed to get the vegan chocolate cake before others have already devoured it. I can recommend it if Members have not met it before.

I thank everybody in this place for their contributions to this debate and to the very many Bill Committees that we have had over the course of the last Parliament. I know that we are not quite at the end of this Parliament yet, but we are in a period of ping-pong between this place and the other place—a duel, if you will, as the Leader of the House called it earlier—when we will see the final results of those Bill Committee deliberations. I urge the Government to work constructively with the Opposition in the coming Parliament on how we manage parliamentary business, so that we are not bounced into positions by new things appearing in the other place, concerns about which have rightly been raised by Members on both sides of the House. We all know that there is a better way of doing it.

Members who serve on Bill Committees are not often given the recognition that they deserve. It is detailed—I would never say boring—work, but it certainly requires an attention to detail that many people perhaps do not realise that they will need when they come to this place. It is so important that we get legislation right. I particularly thank the Lords who sat late into the night for many Bills that really needed that extra attention, which was caused by the insertion of new things and also by just wanting to get it right. We, too, will always play our part to work with the Government to try to do the right thing by our constituents. I hope the Leader of the House has heard the challenges today from my hon. Friend the Member for Putney on the employment Bill and on the need for the building safety crisis to be addressed, on the nature and biodiversity crisis raised by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green), and on so many other things that will need to be addressed in the coming Session. The Leader of the House will know that he has just a few short weeks in which to work with his colleagues on what is to come. I hope that he will have heeded the words that we have heard today. I thank all colleagues, and I wish everyone a very happy Easter.

4.47 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): I thank the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) not only for her approach to this debate

[Mark Spencer]

today, but for her approach as shadow Leader of the House. I look forward to working with her in the next Session and—I think she said this—to our striding out together during the Queen's Speech, which gives me confidence that she does not think that I will be sacked before the Queen's speech, so I am at least grateful for that. I can give her this reassurance: it is not me who is eating her vegan food, nor will it be at any point in the future.

It is a pleasure to conclude today's debate, which has been conducted in the best of spirits, and I look forward to trying to get in as many comments as I can. I think that I have probably less than a minute per contribution, but I will of course do my very best to get through as much as I can.

I cannot really proceed any further without making reference to Sir David Amess. A number of speeches today have made reference to David's past contributions in this debate and the fact that we should refer to the summer recess debate as the David Amess debate. Frankly, though, it does not really matter what the authorities do, because Members of this House will call it the David Amess debate, and that is probably the right course.

The debate started with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) standing in for the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, and we are grateful to him for that. I hope that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee makes a speedy recovery and will be back in his place immediately after the Easter recess.

My hon. Friend started by talking about the pressure on refugees and how we should not forget about Afghan refugees, despite a lot of focus in this place on the Ukrainian situation. I think he is right. The Government's resettlement scheme for Afghans has placed more than 6,000 people and continues to be supportive, but he was right to make that point.

My hon. Friend then went on to talk about Harrow Council. He is, of course, a worthy opponent to his friends on Harrow Council, not least by drawing attention in recent business questions to the fact that their speed of response is quite poor, and I know he will continue to hold them to account. However, he did take the trouble to praise the council for its safety at night campaign for women. Once again, that is worth flagging in the House—it is something the Government take seriously, which is why we have invested more than £30 million in our safer streets and safety of women at night funds to help women and girls to feel safer. I think hon. Members across the House will support my hon. Friend and Harrow Council in that campaign.

My hon. Friend also talked about the challenges of rented homes and the pressure of some of those homes being converted into houses in multiple occupation. That is a challenge that other hon. Members have also raised, and the Government are very much aware of it.

In addition, my hon. Friend mentioned access to GPs and the challenges many people face in getting a GP appointment. There was a debate in Westminster Hall earlier this week on that very challenge, particularly in association with new developments where facilities for new GPs are not put in place. The Government have made £520 million available to improve access to general

practice. I hope technology will help in some circumstances, because people who cannot have face-to-face appointments can have virtual ones, freeing up the space for those who need a face-to-face appointment.

My hon. Friend went on to talk about Stanmore station and the challenges of the planned development in its car park. I hope he will be successful in his defence against that development.

In conclusion, my hon. Friend talked about smoking and his desire to see the age for the purchase of cigarettes rise from 18 to 21. He is a long-standing campaigner on that topic, although I am personally a little more liberal than he is. I recognise the damage that smoking does, but I would hope that most people in the United Kingdom today are aware that if they smoke, they are risking their lives and will damage their health. I celebrate their freedom to make that individual choice and to continue to smoke if they choose, but they should be aware that they will damage their health and probably shorten their lives. We should all continue to ensure that colleagues and constituents are aware that that is what they are doing when they choose to smoke.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) raised a very personal case in her constituency. One cannot help but be sympathetic to Debbie, Michael and Donna, who lost Lillie in such tragic circumstances. The hon. Lady went on to talk about the challenges of changing the law on someone who has committed a terrible crime of that nature and is clearly guilty of dangerous driving or drink-driving being able to continue to drive until they are convicted.

That is a huge challenge, and a difficult one to overcome. I hope the hon. Lady will recognise that it is a long-standing principle in UK law that people are innocent until proven guilty. We have to go through a judicial process, and until someone is convicted in that judicial process, in the eyes of the law they are innocent. That means that an expedited process is required, to get from the offence to the conviction. We need a speedy response from the Crown Prosecution Service and our courts system to ensure that people who commit such heinous crimes are held to account very quickly. I hope she will extend my sympathy to the Clack family.

The hon. Lady also referred to some social media posts that have been put up about Lillie, which obviously add to the family's pain. I hope there will be an opportunity for her to raise her concerns during the passage of the Online Safety Bill, which will have its Second Reading on the first day back after the Easter recess.

Next up we had my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who talked about the huge challenge of planning applications for small developers. I am sure that my colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will have heard her plea. She mentioned Astbury Place and Neil Taylor, who had a challenge with whether or not he was going to build a bridge. I wish him well with his campaign. I recognise that some constituents will take a different view. That highlights the challenge of being a Member of Parliament when we have constituents who take a different view on a single topic. She then went on to mention religious freedoms in Pakistan, which she has been a long-term campaigner on.

The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) talked about Julian Assange and his plight in a

UK jail. They will be aware that that case is currently going through the courts, so it is quite difficult to comment on it, but I know that between them they will continue to raise his plight and his case.

The right hon. Member for Islington North talked specifically about refugees, but was open in condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine, and I praise him for that. Where we differ is in our interpretation of the Government's approach to Saudi Arabia. I understand that he has grave concerns about our relationship with Saudi Arabia. I think the best way to influence our friends around the world is to continue our dialogue, to continue to meet those people, to continue to trade with our friends in Saudi Arabia, and to try to influence their human rights and their record in their own country by friendly conversations and influence through our trading relationship.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) made a compelling case for the Elizabeth Cross, which he said would be a great medal for those who had served in our emergency services. In fact I think he wanted to call it the Prince Philip Cross, comparing it with the Elizabeth Cross for military people. It is a worthy campaign and I add my support for it.

We had a quick wander down the chalk streams of the Chess and the Misbourne in Chesham and Amersham. I commend the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) for all the work she is doing to protect those chalk streams, which are absolutely vital to our environment. I recognise the challenge that HS2 must be bringing to that part of the world with the construction that is taking place in her patch. Hopefully that pain will soon be over and we will be able to ride on HS2 once it has finished its construction process. She also paid tribute to the generosity of the people in her constituency. I highlight to all Members that there is a support centre in Portcullis House that will remain open over Easter for the people who need help.

We then got on to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey). He talked about Tipton, Great Bridge island, green spaces in Wednesbury, market traders, antisocial behaviour in Hill Top, and Rev. Mark Wilson and Vijay Gaddu. He got so much in that there is too much to mention. But we did get to

recognise the difference between Birmingham and the Black Country—I will not make that mistake. He talked about his drive of 45 minutes to go one mile to Great Bridge island. I feel his pain; I once had a car like that myself.

The hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) talked about the huge housing challenges in her patch and tenants' rights. I hope that that message will be received. I will make sure that the relevant Minister has heard her pleas. She went on to talk about the challenges that the communities of many colleagues across this House have with the Met police at the moment. Where wrongdoing takes place or racism is found, we will take action—she can have that firm commitment from the Government.

The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) talked about a meeting with the DWP. I will make sure that happens for her, and I am sorry it has not happened already. She also talked about the Met's management. I am sure that the Home Secretary will have heard her concerns and will receive her letter in due course.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) talked about the Pentecostal church on Scrubs Lane, which he also raised at business questions. I wish him well with that. I wish the reverend all the best in his pursuit of delivering through his food bank and feeding hundreds of people despite being locked out of his own church. I know that the hon. Gentleman is a huge campaigner in his patch and a formidable opponent. That developer will be concerned, having him as an opponent and an advocate for his community.

We then heard a little more about the boat race from the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and the pier that Fulham football club is building. I wish all those participating in Putney all the best. Finally, I am sadly out of time, but I was grateful for the contribution of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), which I enjoyed very much.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Ambulance Response Times: Shropshire

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

5 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I thank Mr Speaker for granting today's Adjournment debate on a topic that is so important to my constituents in North Shropshire and to people across Shropshire and across the country. I start by making it clear that I am not here to criticise the hard-working NHS staff in our ambulance services and emergency departments. Indeed, I thank them for their incredibly hard and dedicated work in difficult and demotivating circumstances, but there is clearly a problem with the provision of emergency care in Shropshire, with complex causes, and I bring it before this House to urge the Government to take some action.

It was clear throughout my election campaign, and has been clear from my inbox since then, that stories of excessive waits for an ambulance are not a rarity. I have since urged my constituents to contact me and share their experiences. Just since Monday, my office has been met with a tidal wave of correspondence, each story as saddening and frightening as the last. A care home reported a wait of 19 hours for an elderly resident with a broken hip. An elderly diabetic man fell and dislocated his shoulder. He was advised not to drink or eat anything in case surgery was required, and then waited 15 hours for an ambulance to arrive. A disabled man fell in his bathroom and waited for 21 hours for an ambulance. He was fortunately lifted from the floor after eight hours by a helpful neighbour. A man waited with a stranger experiencing heart attack symptoms on the side of the road for hours, only to give up and drive the gentleman to A&E himself.

A man with a suspected stroke waited nine hours for an ambulance and a further five in the ambulance waiting to be transferred into hospital. A 92-year-old lady fell at 8.30 in the morning, suffering bleeding from the head and a broken leg. She was looked after by her 75-year-old neighbour for almost eight hours until the ambulance arrived, and then waited in the ambulance for transfer into the A&E department until 2.30 the next morning. She had not eaten since 6.30 the evening before her fall. An elderly woman fell down the stairs shortly after lunch. Her emergency carers—she has a red button to press for them—made her comfortable and called an ambulance, but they could not carry on waiting forever. After an 11-hour wait, she was alone with her front door open so that the ambulance crew could access her house. That was 3 o'clock in the morning.

I could easily spend the next half hour relating heartbreaking stories, and I thank all my constituents who contacted me for taking the time to get in touch and explain the scale of the problem. One story in particular brought the issue home, and some Members may have read about it in the newspapers. It was the story of a young footballer who slipped on AstroTurf while playing football at school. He dislocated his knee and waited so long for an ambulance that by the time one finally arrived he had developed hypothermia. I do not know whether Members can imagine the distress of this young man, and the teaching staff who stayed on in the dark, long after the school day had ended, as his condition deteriorated out in the cold.

What all these stories have in common is that they could have been much worse. I am sure everyone in the House would agree that nobody should have to suffer waiting an excessive amount of time for an ambulance, yet tragically in North Shropshire it is pretty common. I know this problem is not unique to Shropshire. I am sure that many colleagues have received similar emails describing similar events. In parts of Britain, an excessive wait for an ambulance has become normal.

The problems surrounding this crisis are complex, and I am not here to propose a simple quick fix. However, there are consistent themes at the core of the issue. It is vital that we recognise them if we are to work out how to move on from here. The first is the problem of handing over patients at the emergency departments in Shrewsbury and Telford. West Midlands Ambulance Service has told me that, on the day the young footballer dislocated his knee, 868 hours were lost waiting to hand over patients, and that nearly 2,600 hours were lost in the month up to 29 March. Handover times in Shropshire are significantly worse than in the rest of the country, and there have been times when every ambulance based in Shropshire is waiting outside a hospital to discharge a patient.

The hospital trust has declared a critical incident on no less than four separate occasions so far this year, and each of those incidents coincided with an increase in the number of heartbreaking stories coming into my inbox.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this incredibly important issue to the House. Such heartbreaking stories are common to all Shropshire MPs. Does she agree that a combination of factors—I am sure she will go on to discuss some of them—including the transfer of patients on to wards, as well as the inaccessibility of general practitioners, is putting additional pressure on A&E?

Helen Morgan: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I entirely agree with her. I will stress some of those points later in my speech.

The emergency departments of the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust report that they suffer from a shortage of space and staff, along with the additional challenges of separating covid patients—on Tuesday this week, the trust had more covid patients than at any previous point in the pandemic. The trust also reports delays in discharging patients who are well enough to leave hospital because it is struggling to find care packages or care home spaces.

A number of care homes in Shropshire are currently closed because of the pandemic. Shropshire shares the national problem of a shortage of care workers and care homes, which is probably exacerbated by our high proportion of elderly patients. The inability to discharge patients who would doubtless be better off at home or in a care home setting reduces the flow of patients through the hospital.

The impact of all this is that, because ambulances wait so long at hospitals, the vast majority of ambulance journeys across Shropshire begin in Shrewsbury or Telford. It is not possible to reach the most seriously ill patients towards the edge of the county within the target time if the ambulance sets out from one of those two towns. This, combined with the closure of community ambulance

stations, means that very few ambulances are free in places such as Oswestry and Market Drayton when people become ill and require one.

Another factor, as the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) alluded to, is the volume of patients accessing emergency departments, or being taken to one in an ambulance, because there is no other option locally, particularly in the evening or at the weekend. Shropshire has a worsening shortage of GPs, which is leading to patients attending emergency departments for relatively minor issues because they simply have no alternative. A key reason behind the problem of staff recruitment is the chronic lack of other services in Shropshire, but that is a debate for another day.

The Government must deliver on their promise to recruit more GPs, and they must ensure that people with non-urgent healthcare needs are provided with adequate resources in the community. I am incredibly proud that my constituents Sian Tasker and Lawrence Chappel in Oswestry and, beyond my constituency, Darren Childs in Ludlow, and other campaigners, are working tirelessly to keep this issue in the public light and are campaigning to keep their community ambulance stations open. It is partly because of their hard work that we are finally discussing this issue in Parliament.

I am afraid to say that, so far, the Government have refused to listen to the countless warnings by campaigners and those working on the frontline. The Care Quality Commission's "State of health care and adult social care in England" report last year, gave a stark warning that overstretched ambulance services and emergency departments are putting patients at risk. The numbers speak for themselves. The Association of Ambulance Chief Executives has found that, nationally, 160,000 people a year are coming to harm because of delayed handovers to A&E. Of those, a shocking 12,000 experience severe harm.

I have repeatedly asked the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to meet me and the West Midlands Ambulance Service to discuss how we can tackle local issues together. I am deeply disappointed that, so far, he has refused my request. It seems to many people in Shropshire that the Department of Health and Social Care is burying its head in the sand and refusing to acknowledge the seriousness of the issue we face. I take this opportunity to urge the Minister to meet me and my colleagues across the county to discuss the crisis and to hear some first-hand accounts of those left waiting in distress so that we can come to some sort of solution together.

I have no doubt that all hon. Members present, including those on the Government Benches, want to ensure that people at their most vulnerable are kept safe. I welcome the recently announced additional £55 million of support for ambulance services. I fear, however, that that money may not go far enough or may not be targeted in the areas of greatest need. The hopes of the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust are pinned on the Future Fit hospital transformation programme, which kicked off in 2013. It is reliant on £312 million of funding, the source of which may be an interest-bearing loan—I will happily correct the record if I am incorrect, but that is my understanding. Unfortunately, more than eight years later, a strategic outline case has still not been signed off. The estimated costs have spiralled by almost 70% and it is likely that they will not be covered by the Government.

The initial promises of urgent care centres in more rural areas—for example, one was guaranteed for Oswestry—investment in community hospitals and local planned care centres were all quietly dropped in the summer of 2015. Promises of investment in public health and prevention, which is a good idea and would have been welcome in Shropshire, are also apparently no further forward. We are consistently told that there is no more money in the pot for faster, better-resourced ambulance services or urgent care staff, yet the Government wasted more than £10 billion on personal protective equipment that is not up to scratch. It is time that they listened to the warning signs that they have been ignoring and finally step up to provide proper support for ambulance services and accident and emergency departments.

There are several steps that the Government could take right away to get to the bottom of the causes of the issue. The Secretary of State could commission the Care Quality Commission under powers laid out in section 48 of the Health and Social Care Act 2008 to conduct an investigation into the causes and impacts of ambulance service delays. That is a fairly simple step and the law already allows for him to commission the CQC. Once the Government have a professional assessment of the complexity of the causes of the delays to ambulance service response, they can take the correct steps, targeted at the correct causes of the problems, to make some rapid improvements to the service. As I have outlined, the causes will most likely lie in a number of areas across emergency and social care, but until they are fully understood by the right people, they cannot be resolved.

The Government could also pass the Ambulance Waiting Times (Local Reporting) Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), which would require accessible, localised reports of ambulance response times to be published. Once the data was available, it would enable central and devolved Governments to accurately understand where the delays are and how best to tackle them, because we should be following the data and the facts to provide the right solutions and the right resourcing in the areas that need them most. That Bill is already written, it has had its First Reading and it is ready to go.

I brought this debate to Parliament to ensure that the Minister and the Secretary of State understand the scale of the problem in Shropshire and, crucially, the urgency in resolving it. How many more elderly citizens will have to wait for 10 hours, with their front door open, for an ambulance? How many more people will have to wait at the roadside with a stranger who they believe might be close to death? How many more young adults will develop hypothermia when they initially have a trivial injury, such as a dislocated knee? How many more cases of serious harm, or even avoidable death, will it take?

I thank the Minister for being here this evening and responding to my speech. I also thank Mr Speaker for granting this Adjournment debate. I take the opportunity to thank everybody in the Chamber for coming along and to wish them a happy Easter and a restful break.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): Just as I had the pleasure of giving the final speech in the final debate before the House went into recess before the last half-term, I have the same privilege today. To that end, I congratulate

[Edward Argar]

the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) on securing this important debate. In the short time in which she has been a Member of this House, she has taken an extremely close interest in the issues of ambulances and healthcare for her constituents more broadly. She has been assiduous in raising them in the House, as she has today, or through other means with Ministers and the Department. I pay tribute to her for that.

The hon. Lady will be aware, as she has genuinely and openly said, that there are complex causes behind the challenges faced by her constituents, and also by people around the country, with the ambulance service and ambulance response times. Ambulance services have faced extraordinary pressures, which have been particularly exacerbated during the pandemic. I am sure the House will join me in expressing gratitude, as she did, to all the ambulance service staff in the NHS for their outstanding work and dedication during this time. I recognise the very powerful individual cases that the hon. Lady cited, suitably anonymised, to illustrate her arguments and her case.

As I have mentioned, the pandemic has placed very significant demands on the service. In February this year, the service answered over 760,000 calls to 999—this is nationally, and I will turn to the hon. Lady's local situation in due course—which is an increase of 13% on February 2020. That places very significant pressures on the ambulance service and the wider NHS, and I will turn to the broader causes shortly. She was absolutely right to highlight that the issue is often not with the ambulance service itself—the number of ambulances or the number of staff—but about handovers and the ability to do turnarounds having safely deposited a patient at an acute setting in a hospital, but I will turn to that in a minute.

A range of other issues, as well of course as demand, impact on performance, including the need for infection prevention and control measures, which remain in place in hospitals. They may not be as acute or as severe as they were at the height of the pandemic, but they are still there, and that does have an impact. There are the handover delays the hon. Lady spoke about, which are linked to capacity with those infection prevention and control measures, but also to the ability either to treat and discharge or to admit patients to a hospital. In recent months, we have also had high workforce sickness absence rates, often down to covid and covid self-isolation, with staff quite rightly taking the view that when they test positive for covid they should stay at home until they do not.

In spite of these pressures—and this is in no way to diminish the point the hon. Lady made about the impact on her constituents, but is by way of context—the average response time in the west midlands to category 1 calls, the most serious calls classified as life threatening, was maintained at eight minutes and 11 seconds in February 2022. That was despite a 40% increase in that category of calls on the previous year and a 16% increase locally in 999 calls overall. At a national level, the category 1 response time has been largely maintained at about nine minutes on average over the last several months—so not quite as good as the performance in the West Midlands—despite a 23.5% increase in those incidents compared with before the pandemic. However, we are

clear that there have been significant increases in response times in the other categories, which of course we must improve.

Helen Morgan: I just want to make the point that in Shropshire we are not seeing the same level of service that we see across the west midlands as a whole. I am calling for more granular data because I think some excellent service provided elsewhere in the West Midlands Ambulance Service area is overshadowing some of the specific problems we are seeing in Shropshire. In addition, the number of hospital admissions to the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust is running roughly at the same level as in prior years, so although the covid pandemic has provided challenges in separating out such patients when they arrive through infection control measures, it is not actually leading to a higher level of admissions.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I will turn to her specific asks in a moment.

However, I will turn now to the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), which I am aware of. I have to be honest and say that we do not consider that the Bill would necessarily be the most appropriate way of achieving what she wants. The challenge with that legislation is that, at a time when we wish trusts to be focused on the delivery of frontline services, it is another administrative process of data collection. I would add that trusts of course operate at trust level, not at an individual station or county level, and trusts may cover a number of counties. So while I am aware of her legislation, it is not something that I believe would achieve the outcomes or be practical in the way she wishes, and she and I regularly have a to and fro across the Dispatch Box about a number of issues when she speaks for her party on health and care matters.

There is strong support in place to improve performance. At the national level, as the hon. Member for North Shropshire generously recognised, there was £55 million of investment last summer, in advance of the winter, to help increase ambulance staffing capacity to manage pressures. All trusts received a portion of that funding to expand capacity through additional crews on the road and additional clinical support in control rooms as well as extending hospital ambulance liaison officer cover at the most challenged acute trusts.

On overall staffing, which includes frontline clinical staff and the clinical support staff who work with them, our ambulance service has seen about a 38% increase since 2010—the Liberal Democrats can quite rightly take some credit for that from their five years in government—and, indeed, in the last year we have seen an increase of about 500 frontline staff. So we have increased staff and continue to increase available staff.

The £55 million was supported by an additional £4.4 million in capital investment—these are still national figures, but I will turn to her specific local circumstances—which helped to keep an additional 154 ambulances on the road during winter over and above normal levels. Call handler numbers, which are equally important, are being boosted with more than 2,400 on target to be in place by the end of March—the end of today. That is about 500 more FTE—full-time equivalent—staff compared with September 2021, with potential for services to increase in capacity further during the coming financial year.

NHS England and Improvement is also providing targeted support to the hospitals facing the greatest issues with delays in the handover of ambulance patients, helping them to identify short and longer-term interventions to reduce delays and get ambulances swiftly back out on the road. She is right that that is hugely important, and even more so in areas with large rural populations because of the distances involved. Trusts also receive supportive continuous central monitoring and support by NHSEI's national ambulance co-ordination centre.

With clinical support in control rooms, the ambulance service is closing just over 11% of 999 calls with clinical advice over the phone, which is an increase of three quarters since before the pandemic. That helps to save valuable ambulance resources to respond to more urgent calls, with that clinical input ensuring that the advice and decisions are right.

The hon. Lady will be pleased to hear that significant local support is in place to improve response times in her county. The West Midlands Ambulance Service is working with community partners to help avoid conveying patients to hospital where there is no clinical necessity, providing alternate treatment and care at home or in the community and helping to avoid unnecessary trips to hospital, thereby freeing up resources and hopefully providing a more pleasant experience for those patients.

In raw numbers, the West Midlands Ambulance Service conveyed over 600 fewer patients to hospital in February based on the clinical advice this year compared with two years ago. It has also introduced a clinical validation team of advanced paramedics who work in control rooms and clinically triage lower urgency cases and, where appropriate, signpost patients to other services, as I alluded to. In February, that team reviewed 967 cases in Shropshire, of which 61% of were not sent an ambulance, 14% were treated on the scene and just 25% were conveyed to hospital. That was based on the clinical triage, which I am sure the hon. Lady agrees should be central to any decisions made. That has played a significant part in helping the service to tackle the pressures.

Other practical solutions include hospital ambulance liaison officers—HALOs—who are paramedics who work with bed managers to smooth out the flow of patients coming to an A&E department. They can provide a constant flow of information about capacity to the strategic command cell at the ambulance service headquarters, escalating any issues and avoiding queueing where possible. There is also joint work to cohort ambulance patients at A&E sites, where a single ambulance crew takes responsibility for three or four patients. That releases crews to respond to outstanding calls in the community more quickly.

A new same-day emergency centre—SDEC—has been opened at the Royal Shrewsbury to divert patients, as clinically appropriate, away from A&E, improving handover times. In the two and a half years that I have been a health Minister, I have discovered that there are probably almost as many acronyms in health as in the Ministry of Defence. Surgical SDEC capacity at the Royal Shrewsbury has also been expanded and all SDEC units receive ambulances directly for suitable patients.

The hon. Lady rightly mentioned hospitals, and I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) is here and made an intervention. During her seven years in the House, she has been a regular and vocal advocate for her local hospital in Telford. I pay

tribute to her, because it was due to her campaigning and tenacity that there is an A&E locally at Telford. That is still seeing patients and helping to alleviate the pressure in Shropshire. She should rightly be proud of that, having successfully campaigned for it.

Action is being taken locally to improve the patient flow through hospitals by discharging patients more quickly to create bed space. The aim is not only to increase the number of discharges a day, but to bring more discharges forward to earlier in the day, when it is clinically safe to do so, to allow the effective discharge and transition back to care at home or in a care home. Health and care system partners locally are looking to create additional community and social care capacity to support timely discharge, create bed space to take patients from A&E and reduce ambulance handover times.

At a national level, we have set up a national discharge taskforce. As a Minister, I get almost daily statistics about where we are on delayed discharges across the country. It is a complex picture, with a variety of reasons behind delayed discharges. The hon. Member for North Shropshire is correct that some are about delays in getting into care homes or getting domiciliary care packages or rehabilitation packages at home. Some are also down to delays in the hospital in sign-offs and procedures, and there is more that we continue to do to drive those delays down.

Construction is also under way on a new modular ward at the Royal Shrewsbury site, with 32 additional beds in service by spring 2022. That is alongside a £9.3 million upgrade of the emergency department at the Royal Shrewsbury, delivering additional cubicles, a new and improved majors department, a new designated emergency zone for children and young people and a new clinical decisions unit. The first phase of that work is complete and all areas will be finished by spring 2022.

The hon. Lady raised a number of other issues, including the Future Fit model. We have been clear that funding of £312 million was allocated for that project, and that remains allocated. The challenge we face is that, thus far, the trust has not proposed a solution that meets that budget. We continue to work with the trust and to encourage it to do so. I hope that it will so that we can continue to drive that important project forward.

I will very gently push back on what the hon. Lady said about there being £10 billion of PPE that is not fit for purpose. She will know that that is not correct. In the statement that was made about write-downs, not write-offs, the amount was about £8.7 billion, and it was not all PPE, by any means, that was not fit for purpose. Only a tiny proportion of that was the case. A significant element of that was essentially due to over-ordering at the height of the pandemic to make sure that the frontline had the PPE that it needed. We were buying at the height of the market, and there is currently a glut of PPE, so its value has inevitably declined. Not all of it will be used, because we got more than we needed to make sure that clinicians and others on the frontline were not exposed.

The hon. Lady touched on local ambulance Make Ready stations and the changes to them. Decisions on reconfigurations and changes to that are made locally by the trust; it consults, but it makes those decisions. The Government do not have any power over those matters. The Health and Care Bill, which we debated yesterday, would give the Secretary of State greater

[Edward Argar]

power over such reconfigurations in the way that she asked, but her hon. Friend the Member for St Albans argued against that. I gently say that that is a matter for the local trust and the usual NHS processes on reconfigurations.

The hon. Lady touched on, I think—forgive me if I am wrong—asking the CQC to look into this issue. It is entirely open for her or others to raise it with the CQC, and the CQC will make a decision or a judgment on whether it believes that it is appropriate or otherwise to look into the matter.

In the few seconds that I have left, before Mr Deputy Speaker calls me to order, I say that I recognise and do not in any way diminish the significance of the issues that the hon. Lady raised. I hope that I have given her some reassurance that we are working through these issues and that we continue to put the support in place to help her constituents in Shropshire and more broadly.

Finally, the hon. Lady requested a meeting, and I am conscious that she has raised the issue of correspondence. I have asked for that; I believe that that has happened since Christmas, as the Department works through the backlog. There is still a delay in correspondence, but I have pulled that out and asked for it, and I am happy to meet her and her fellow Shropshire MPs, together with the ambulance trust, to discuss their collective concerns or reflections that they would like to put to me as a Minister.

I conclude by wishing the hon. Lady a very happy Easter and by thanking her for bringing this to my attention and the attention of the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): On behalf of Mr Speaker and the entire Deputy Speaker team, I wish a happy Easter and a good recess to all who work here.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 31 March 2022

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Urban Transport: Future Funding

1.30 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future funding of urban transport.

This is an important subject, Mr Sharma, and there is an awful lot to say about it. Looking around the Chamber, it looks like I have about an hour to say it in, although I will not take that amount of time. I have been interested in the subject for an awfully long time. I will cover buses and light rail, in particular looking at the mayoral combined authority areas. I thank the Urban Transport Group and the mayoral authority in the South Yorkshire region for their briefings.

Public transport is more important for certain groups in the population than for others, such as people on low incomes. An interesting figure, given that we sort of think that everyone has a car—these days, some families have several cars, looking at the parking challenges on some estates—is that, for those whose incomes are in the lowest quintile, 45% of families do not have access to a car. That is almost half of families in that quintile. Older people often do not drive anymore, and the concessionary fare scheme is important for them. The group that is sometimes forgotten about is young people. Young children can go with their parents, but when kids get into their teenage years, they want a bit of independence. They are either not old enough to drive or do not have a car, so public transport can be important for them as well.

What sort of journeys are involved? Public transport is important for all sorts of journeys, such as getting to work—again, particularly for young people in lower-paid jobs—and for people trying to find a job. Another interesting figure is that 77% of job seekers do not have access to a car and 85% of job seekers in the 18-to-24 age group do not have access to a car. To get a job, people need a good public transport system to reach the right place for an interview or whatever.

Public transport is important not just for work but for how people run their lives. Many people need transport to get to a shop, in which case they need it to be easily accessible, or to visit friends and family. I have talked to people about the fact that when a husband or wife goes into a care home after living together for years, they pick a care home on a bus route that they can get to. The problem comes when the bus route changes and they cannot get there anymore—that is another challenge. There are also people who normally use a car but want to go out for a meal or drink and to do it safely. Public transport is important in all those cases.

The Mayor of the Sheffield city region, Dan Jarvis—I pay credit to Dan, because he takes the issue particularly seriously and he will be stepping down in May—asked me to review bus services in Sheffield about three or four years ago. We set up a bus commission, and I got a number of local people, representatives of the public, the unions and the private sector, and national transport experts to look at the situation.

We saw a bus service that was basically in decline. It was a spiral of decline: services got cut, so few people used them, so more services got cut. It was a journey to the bottom, that is all. We had complaints about frequency, as services got less; about services being removed altogether at weekends and evenings; about lack of connectivity as people could get from A to B, but often had to go via C and D; and about frequent route changes. That takes us back to the problem of the elderly person in a care home or someone who has just got a job only to find six months later that the bus route that gets them there at 7 o'clock in the morning to start their shift disappears. Those are really frustrating things, and of course, reliability is a problem. As more people use their cars and there is more congestion, the reliability of public transport gets worse.

We made a lot of recommendations. I will not go into them all now, or I probably will be here for the next hour, but the essence of them was some quick wins, which the combined authority has brought in—such as a scheme of cheaper fares for young people to encourage them on to public transport and recognise the particular challenges for them over the last few years with covid and the effects of austerity beforehand—as well as the need to look ahead to enhanced partnership and a route through to franchising, if that was decided to be the best way forward. We appreciate the powers that Government have given to mayoral combined authorities, which we think should probably be extended automatically to other authorities to enable them to move to franchising if that is appropriate.

We also looked at funding, which is a major problem. We talk about levelling up, but figures show that Government spending on buses per head in London is £75, and in Sheffield it is £5. That is quite a big difference. Passenger numbers have changed over the past 10 years, with numbers in the Sheffield city region dropping from 150 million to 92 million—a 21% fall in 10 years. It is a spiral of cuts and inadequate funding to support buses. The Campaign for Better Transport has estimated that Government funding for buses in England fell by 43% in real terms over that 10-year period, so that is a big fall. A big difference between funding for London and for areas such as Sheffield creates major challenges with declining bus ridership, which, of course, means less income coming in to the operators, to which they respond with more cuts.

The bus review set out what we should do, then covid hit. I appreciate that covid has disrupted an awful lot, both at local and national level, and I say to the Minister that we welcome the Government support provided throughout that period. We would not have any bus services left without it, because at one point during the initial restrictions, passenger numbers dropped to 10% of what they were before covid. The support that has been provided, both for buses and for light rail, has been welcome.

[Mr Clive Betts]

Even now, passenger numbers on bus and light rail in the Sheffield city region are only back to 75% of what they were before covid, so 25% is still missing. That fall in passenger numbers is mainly down to older people still being concerned about travelling and the change in office working, with fewer people travelling into the office. The drop in Sheffield is actually bigger than the drop in, say, Doncaster, because there are more offices in Sheffield. We can see the figures. One question for the Minister is, what happens in September? We are looking at another cliff edge. If the covid funding, which is welcome, disappears—it has been given only until September—what happens? Those numbers will not recover to 100% of what they were before covid, if at all—we do not know about office working and things—and certainly not by September. There are some really big challenges.

Bus passenger numbers were declining prior to covid and now we have an even lower number of passengers, so what is the funding requirement? Clearly, the amount of money that the Government will have to provide in order to even stabilise the system, not improve it, is greater now than it was before covid, because we are in a worse position. Areas with light rail systems have an even bigger challenge, because the fixed costs of light rail cannot be dispensed with. The network is there—the rails, the stations, the trams and everything else. The fixed costs are there, and if there is no recognition of that, not only will the sustainability of light rail become a major challenge but, if authorities keep their light rail systems running, they will have to cut their bus service funding even more, so there are real issues around that.

We welcome the concept of the Government's Bus Back Better. It is a good phrase and there are some really good statements from the Government in the national bus strategy, such as

"we want main road services in cities and towns to run so often that you don't need a timetable."

I say tongue in cheek, Mr Sharma, that people will not need a timetable in some places soon because the situation is so serious that there will not be any buses to have a timetable for. It goes on:

"We want better services in the evenings and at weekends".

Many places do not have them now, but the coming cuts, which I will say more about, will make the situation even worse.

The bus strategy is right that we need more buses and more passengers on buses, as well as

"dramatically increased passenger numbers, reduced congestion, carbon and pollution".

Improving public transport and getting more people on to buses and light rail is good for congestion; for the climate change agenda, because the number of people travelling on a bus is the same as the number in several cars so less carbon dioxide is emitted; and for pollution, because it means less nitrogen dioxide. We should not forget about NO₂, the silent killer, which is more damaging to children than anyone else because it sinks and children breathe the air at a lower level. Those are real issues, and it is right that the Government have sought to focus on them.

I mentioned levelling up, and accessibility of public transport is a levelling-up issue. People with lower incomes and more poorly paid jobs tend to be concentrated to a

greater extent in some of our urban areas, where levelling up is needed. The Government's initial approach was to offer a £3 billion programme. Some of the money has come in through the sustainable transport scheme. The Sheffield city region has had £570 million, which is not all for buses. There is a bit for light rail and some for road schemes as well; I question how those schemes fall under the sustainable transport remit, but that was the bid that was put in and accepted. The city region has bid for £450 million from the bus service improvement plan. Will the Minister tell us how much money is left in the BSIP programme and when we will find out what has been allocated? We were told there was £3 billion but now we hear it will be only £1.2 billion or £1.3 billion because the Government have taken the money that they spent on covid support off the £3 billion. The total amount of money is the same, but the covid support has been taken off that, meaning less than half the original amount is left for the BSIP programme.

I say to Ministers that we have to get away from the pots-of-money approach. We made that point to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, who basically agreed with it, and to the Minister for Levelling Up—he got it as well—at the recent session of the Select Committee on Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Local authorities have 130 different pots of money, not just for transport, for which they have to make a bid to Government. That is ridiculous. We need to provide a more sustainable and joined-up approach to long-term funding.

Partnerships are happening in many areas. All MCAs have now moved to enhanced partnerships, as required by the Government in order to bid for BSIP and secure long-term funding. That is a good approach, but signing up to an agreement for partnership does not stop cuts being made. Bus operators, particularly First Bus in Sheffield, are already planning cuts in services, even with the enhanced partnerships and Government funding. Some have been announced in the last few months and more are proposed.

Operators have said that if Government funding stops in September, about a third of services will be cut. That is a massive, almost unimaginable number. It destroys the whole framework of the network, which we simply cannot allow to happen. Operators are looking at taking out some routes completely, removing evening and weekend services, where they exist, and reducing frequency, which will simply lead to another spiral of decline. I say to the Minister that whatever methods are used—enhanced partnerships, franchising or whatever—there cannot be any improvement from the current situation unless there is more money in the system. Without that, it simply will not work. Local councils are strapped for cash and they will not find those sorts of resources. There are challenges about whether Mayors should have a levy on council tax, which is worth discussing—that is what Greater Manchester has done. However, in the end, the Government have to step up. It is no use giving London-type powers to urban areas outside London if they do not also have London-type resources. That is the real bottom line.

Light rail almost gets forgotten about. I do not know if anyone at the Department is really interested in light rail, as it does not seem to be mentioned very often. It is a clean, green form of transport. However, if we compare the light rail systems in our country with what is on

offer in other European cities, we see that we are behind the game by many years. That is not a party political point; I put it on the record that we did not do enough as the Labour Government. We did not do enough on bus franchising either. None of that is party political; Governments have not recognised the importance of the subject.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), who is the Opposition spokesperson today, will know that we had a good Supertram system developed in Sheffield and built at the beginning of the 1990s. I am almost tempted not to mention this, but I will: we approved it when I was leader of Sheffield City Council, many years ago, and I am really pleased about that. However, there has not been an extra mile laid since then. I am sorry—a few hundred yards have been laid for the Tram Train into Rotherham. Leeds, just up the road, is a major city but it does not have a light rail system. We are so far behind the curve. Manchester has done very well, with great credit due for that. One or two other cities have also started to develop systems, but overall there simply is not enough funding. Light rail needs Government support and the Government must decide if they want a long-term plan for capital investment in it.

I will mention the Tram Train again, because a pilot from Sheffield to Rotherham has been running for more than three years and is very successful. It is a great credit to the then Transport Minister, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) that, when the scheme was going pear shaped because of Network Rail's incompetence—there is an National Audit Office report to prove that—he stepped in and said, “Yes, although the cost of the scheme has trebled, it is worth it to show that the system works.” It does work. It has been working in Karlsruhe in Germany for nearly 30 years and it is not surprising that light-rail vehicles can run on a heavy-rail system—it works.

What is the plan to roll light rail out across the country? We are looking at Beeching restoration services now; there is one from Sheffield to Barrow Hill, through my constituency. We are arguing very strongly for train stations at Beighton and Waverley in the Rotherham constituency next door, and the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) is supporting the extension. Instead of running the heavy rail line into Sheffield Midland station, it should run into the centre of Sheffield with a Tram Train service. That would get people out of their cars and get rid of the congestion we get on the parkway going to Sheffield. We should use the heavy rail network, which is already there, to put trams on the system at no cost and to connect it better to our urban centres. That can be done all over the country. There are opportunities for that out in Stocksbridge, in the north of Sheffield, that we can look at as well.

There are real possibilities and challenges, but it comes down to how we will fund and deliver the Government's agenda. I have a number of asks for the Minister. Will the Government set out their strategy for public transport in our urban areas? Developing on where we reached with the national bus strategy, are the Government still committed to those objectives in principle and will they set out a way to deliver them in the long term? If they are committed, will the Government set out how that should be funded? There is no use having grand ambitions about not having to look at a timetable

for buses on the main road, or having great evening and weekend services, if there is no money. It is words and nothing else. Words are no help to someone waiting at a bus stop for a bus that may be coming in an hour's time that either does not turn up or, if it does, it turns out that their connection to another place has been removed so they cannot get to where they want to go without an awful lot of effort. In the end, they will not bother going, or they will get in their car, get someone to give them a lift or get a taxi out of frustration.

If we are serious about this, we have to have clear funding commitments. Will responsibility for that now be given to local transport authorities? We have elected a Mayor—will they be given the powers and resources to do this? It is absolutely clear from the levelling-up agenda that local Mayors have to be able to join up their approach to transport with their approaches to home building, delivery of skills and industrial development. Areas need a joined-up approach to economic strategy.

Mayors can do it, but Government never will. It would require several Departments getting together. I remember going to Manchester and talking to business leaders some years ago, as Manchester was pioneering the move towards greater localism and local democracy. Business leaders said, “We don't always agree with the councillors and council leaders, but at least we know where they are. We can go and talk to them. If they have the power to do something, we can have that discussion. If Government have the power, we have to go down and visit civil servants in more than one Department and hope that they might be talking to each other, which isn't always the case.” Therefore devolution of those powers is absolutely key.

Will the Government speed up the franchising process? We have seen how long Manchester, which pioneered it, has taken to go through the process—Manchester is committed, but it has taken forever. It is better than the previous effort, in the Local Transport Act 2008, under which Nexus tried to get franchising in the north-east and was stopped in the courts. It is better than it was, but it is not as simple as it should be.

If the Government really want to give those powers, they should enable them to be used more speedily. As part of that funding commitment, will the Government estimate what it will cost to bring franchising in? There are significant upfront costs, which Manchester has already identified. If we are going to use franchising to improve services, there will be a cost. Franchising is not a magic bullet that once fired makes everything all right overnight. It is a good way to deliver bus services in a strategic, co-ordinated, organised and integrated way, but it is not cost-free. We ought to recognise that.

Let us have a plan for light rail. The Government need to seriously say that it is a way forward. It is a clean, green form of transport, and it should be linked to cleaner, greener buses as well. Although I did not need much reminding, the Minister reminded me that, alongside light rail, we need to have greener buses as a green form of transport—and not just electric buses, but green hydrogen buses. ITM Power in my constituency delivers the green hydrogen—there are different sorts of hydrogen—that is needed to power the bus fleets of the future. It is already doing the refuelling station for Birmingham's hydrogen buses. We ought to encourage that across the country. I welcome the Government's zero-emission bus regional areas, or ZEBRA, initiatives

[Mr Clive Betts]

and the money being given for electric buses, but where is the commitment to a programme for hydrogen buses as well?

We need strategies for light rail and greener buses, but also tram-trains. We have a pilot that works—what is the point of a pilot unless we get encouragement to roll it out across the country? Many heavy rail networks are underused or, in some cases, unused. We do not have to redo the lines; they are there. We can run hybrid trams on them, so we do not necessarily have to install electric wires for all of them. They can be run partly on the electric system and partly on other fuels, once they get out into slightly less urban areas.

I hope I have indicated a lot of the challenges. There has been a real litany of problems—almost disasters—in the last few years, with decline and demoralisation in the sector. Covid has been a massive challenge, and the Government stepped up to the plate there. However, unless authorities are supported in the future, with a clear strategy from Government and commitments to long-term funding, we will be back here in two or three years' time waging the same fight because the spiral of decline has continued; so many people in this country who rely on buses have been left without them; congestion has got worse; we have done nothing to tackle climate change; and we have done nothing to tackle pollution either.

1.54 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for securing today's debate on a really important issue. I stayed down to make sure I spoke in this debate because it is such an important issue. I am sorry it has not had the support that it merits—perhaps Members are demob happy on the last day before recess. Nevertheless, the hon. Member managed to cover the whole range of issues in his speech, so he made up for the fact that nobody else is here to speak in the debate.

The hon. Member said that 45% of those in the lowest income quintile do not have access to a car, which is something we often forget. Outside London, that represents a real restriction on people's mobility, freedom and opportunity to secure a job. He spoke about cheaper bus fares for young people. He might be interested to know that as of the start of this year people under the age of 22 can travel for free on buses in Scotland, which is an excellent new policy, not least because I have two daughters who can take advantage of that scheme and not have to be ferried around by mum and dad so much.

I do not plan to highlight too much more of the hon. Member's speech, simply because he gave it just a second ago, but he did speak of the importance of devolving transport powers, which I will speak to.

Urban areas account for over half of the UK's overall carbon dioxide emissions. If the UK Government are to meet their own target of reaching net zero by 2050, it is critical that towns and cities are equipped and funded properly to renew and transform their transport systems from the fossil fuel-based networks in place at the moment to zero emission and low-impact structures. Sadly, the Government's record so far does not inspire

confidence that that key part of the transition is a priority. The Minister, who in my opinion has one of the best jobs in government—I am quite jealous—has a hard task in being able to do the job properly and secure the required funding, because decarbonising transport is a mammoth task. I do not think she will enjoy much of my speech, so I give her that warning at the start, although she probably expected it.

Colleagues—certainly the Minister—will have heard me outline the Scottish Government's transformational plans for active travel. I make no apologies for bringing them up again because they show the kind of ambition that is needed from the Department for Transport here in London. The active travel budget in Scotland will rise over the next three years to account for 10% of the overall transport budget, bringing the annual investment to at least £320 million a year—in UK terms, over £3 billion a year.

This year alone will see a 37% increase on last year, and within two years we will have seen a threefold increase in the active travel budget, representing £60 per person per year. The DfT's plans amount to £2 billion over the next five years, which works out at just over £7 per person per year of active travel. The difference is utterly stark. Indeed, by 2024-25, Scotland, with less than a tenth of the population, will be within touching distance of what England spends on active travel. That represents a lack of ambition and an absence of vision. If we are serious about meeting net zero targets, we need game changers across society, and we need to ensure that in urban areas, where, in Scotland, 70% of our population lives, citizens are given real options for that change.

This is not just about the national and global picture. Members from nearly every constituency can see the tough time that our high streets are having. A combination of the pandemic, an increase in online shopping, and the hollowing out of household income over the last decade has left our town centres hanging by a thread. Supporting active travel and the idea of 20-minute neighbourhoods in Scotland can also give a boost to town centres, encourage more local spending, and give local authorities a more sustainable income stream generated by flourishing local businesses. Buying and selling locally also helps to cut carbon emissions, creating a virtuous circle that gets even more bang for our bucks.

Active travel is key to that change, but on the evidence so far the ambition from the Treasury and the Department for Transport simply is not there. I genuinely hope to be proved wrong in that respect. As has been said already, buses are fundamental to urban transport. There are nearly 40,000 buses in use on Britain's roads but they need to be replaced, not only as part of the switch to zero-emission vehicles but to provide a more attractive service to people considering changing from private transport.

I have lost count of the number of times that I have asked the Department for Transport for figures on buses, in particular how many of the 4,000 zero-emission buses promised through the ZEBRA scheme are actually on the road, transporting passengers and contributing today to reducing emissions. The Prime Minister promised those 4,000 buses by the end of this Parliament, which at the very most is less than three years away, although if we believe the chairman of the Conservative party it might be only a year down the road. At the current rate,

however, there is zero chance that the Prime Minister's pledge will be met and that simply is not good enough. It is letting down the residents of towns and cities across England yet again.

The truth is that six months after the Prime Minister made his pledge on 4,000 buses, the Scottish Government have got on with delivering. Their Scottish ultra-low emission bus scheme, or SULEBS, delivered 272 buses, and just four weeks ago the Transport Minister, Jenny Gilruth, announced the first phase of the £62 million zero-emission bus challenge fund, or ScotZEB, for a further 276 buses. That is 548 buses delivered or ordered in Scotland, which is the equivalent of nearly 5,500 buses in England. To my mind, that is incredible progress given the challenges of the last few years and the budget pressures that have been forced on Scotland by Westminster.

Despite the long-awaited but very welcome recent announcement of the ZEBRA funding for 943 buses, which the Minister will probably touch on, that is—according to the Government's own data on the website that accompanied that announcement—only 1,678 buses since the pledge was made. Scotland has delivered 327% more zero-emission buses in this Parliament than England and we are far from finished.

There should be no reason why the DFT is lagging so badly behind the Scottish Government. We have broadly the same goals; we both drive on the left. To my mind, therefore, something has gone badly wrong for the DFT, or perhaps, in fairness, more likely with the Treasury. I hope that the Minister will ask searching questions of her Department but she will more likely have to ask them of her Treasury colleagues, because at the moment the Government are just not delivering on the pledge that the Prime Minister made.

The situation in England is an indictment of the lack of urgency that seems to pervade the DFT's attitude to the kind of transformational change that is required if the net zero targets, both in transport and more generally, are to be met at a UK level. That attitude has been perfectly demonstrated by the priority of the Treasury when it comes to funding local bus services; as has been mentioned, the Treasury's priority has been to slash those services. The UK Government's Bus Back Better strategy, complete with a fairly gushing foreword by the Prime Minister in which he boasted of his love of buses, might as well have been stuck in the shredder just months after it was published, because local authorities were told earlier this year that their budget pot would be slashed.

We know that urban areas are more dependent on public charging points for electric vehicles, which is down simply to the different balance of housing stock in more built-up areas. That situation requires local and national Government to raise their game to ramp up the installation of public chargers radically. I am pleased that Scotland is leading the way. Outside Greater London, we have the highest number of charging points per head of any part of these isles, including double the number of rapid chargers per capita that England has.

However, we cannot transition to a future without combustion engine vehicles by leaving flat-dwellers and anyone without a driveway with no route to switch to electric. In Scotland, 36% of people live in a flat, but in Edinburgh that figure rises to 64%, in Glasgow to 71% and in Dundee to 50%. That pattern is broadly similar across England and Wales. We cannot end the

sale of carbon-fuelled cars in the coming years without making sure that urban areas have their public charging network properly designed and properly funded.

The National Infrastructure Commission review found that 300,000 public charging points were needed ahead of 2030. Currently, only 35,000 are in use. Norway, with a population only one twelfth that of the UK, has around 17,000, so we urgently need rapid expansion of the charging network if the NIC's target is to be met, and that expansion is particularly needed in built-up areas.

The Transport Committee, of which I am a member, recently published its report on road pricing. It is clear that as internal combustion engines are phased out, a new way of collecting revenue will be needed, because fuel duty and vehicle excise duty will dwindle to zero under the current system. That sea change in financing, on which I think the debate is just beginning, must also apply to local and regional transport funding. Frankly, it is unacceptable that an organisation such as Transport for the North can see its core funding slashed by 35% at the whim of the DFT.

Local and regional authorities need long-term certainty in their funding streams and, given the types of capital-intensive work that they want to carry out, annual budgets cannot be turned on and off like a tap whenever the Treasury is feeling under the cosh. Urban renewal and the net zero transition are huge long-term projects, and the bodies responsible for delivering them on the ground need the long-term certainty on where the money to pay for them is coming from.

We saw that with the Tyne and Wear Metro, with nearly 40-year-old rolling stock replaced only when the Chancellor signed off on the funding. Up until that point, the transport authority could not be sure whether the trains—built when Jim Callaghan was Prime Minister—would be replaced any time soon. That is no way for transport investment to be carried out. Local authorities need certainty in the medium-to-long term on how the renewal investment will be funded—whether through raising revenue locally or national Government cash.

To conclude, as with so much that is sub-optimal in the UK, the over-centralisation of power through a single Government Department is hindering towns and cities across the country and our ability to meet the challenges of the coming decades. Getting the Treasury to release its grip and devolve power to towns, cities, metropolitan areas, and the devolved Administrations, is fundamental to allowing local decision makers to build the transport networks of the 21st century. The dead hand of Whitehall is holding millions of people back, and it is high time that the Government accepted that.

2.6 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), from a neighbouring constituency, on securing today's important debate. I have seen his many years of campaigning on improving transport connectivity, particularly in Sheffield. I welcome the publication of his bus review, which he chaired for the Mayor of South Yorkshire, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). I will discuss that in further detail later.

[Gill Furniss]

I also thank all other hon. Members present for their contributions to today's debate—so I thank the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands)! We also look forward to the Minister's contribution, of course.

Our public transport network has suffered severely from 12 years of Conservative cuts. Our urban transport networks should be fuelling our post-pandemic recovery, but instead they are facing yet more cuts at a time when they should be investing in services.

First, on buses, in normal times, more journeys are taken by bus than by any other mode of public transport. They are critical to the economic prosperity and social wellbeing of our towns and cities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East states in his bus review:

“Buses are the backbone of Britain's public transport system.” However, under this Government, those vital transport links have been left to decay. Bus coverage is now at the lowest level in decades and communities have been left behind. Since 2010, we have lost a staggering 134 million miles of bus routes.

The Government finally published their long-awaited national bus strategy last March. That could have been a turning point, but instead was a missed opportunity to revolutionise the industry and lead the way on transport decarbonisation. On funding in particular, the Prime Minister pledged to

“level up buses across England towards London standards”,

and promised an extra £3 billion to fulfil that. However, we are already seeing the Government backtracking on that pledge. Leaked documents have shown that the budget for the transformation of buses has shrunk to just £1.4 billion for the next three years. Far from levelling-up, that means more services will inevitably be cut or reduced. Figures show that local authorities have already bid for over £7 billion from that fund. Once all local authorities submit bids, that figure could climb to above £9 billion, so I ask the Minister, why has only £1.4 billion been made available to them?

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East has identified a number of issues relating to bus services in South Yorkshire in his bus review. Those findings are also replicated up and down the country. For instance, he identified that bus miles in South Yorkshire have fallen by an average of 12% between 2010 and 2017 alone. He also highlighted issues of reliability, with over 60% of respondents saying they were dissatisfied with services in the region. That has culminated in passengers feeling isolated and being forced to take cars and taxis. Those modes of transport are not just more expensive in the midst of a cost of living crisis; they also work against our net zero ambitions.

Funding to decarbonise our transport network has fallen woefully short of the Government's rhetoric. The Government talk a big game on this. In February 2020, the Prime Minister promised 4,000 new zero-emission buses by 2025—the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North has already focused on this issue—but this was also reiterated in the national bus strategy last year. However, let us take a closer look at the funding. The first round will make funding available for only 900 buses. Of new funding announced in last year's Budget, only 335 buses have been accounted for. The DfT

has said it will provide further details on how £355 million of new funding will be used “in due course”, so perhaps the Minister could take this opportunity to provide those details or find them out from the appropriate Department. We have funding confirmed for only around 1,200 new buses. Can the Minister explain how these figures align with the Prime Minister's pledge to deliver 4,000 more zero-emission buses on our roads?

I turn to another key pillar of our public transport network: our railways, which have fared no better than our buses in the last decade. The Government's failures on improving rail services, particularly in the north of England, fly in the face of their levelling-up agenda. Transport for the North is set to lose 40% of its core funding in the next financial year, and services will undoubtedly suffer as a result. To compound the situation, the north of England has seen many rail projects scrapped in recent years—for example, plans for lines connecting Leeds and Manchester in the integrated rail plan were scrapped, along with the eastern leg of High Speed 2. Our railways must be at the heart of our covid recovery, but services still remain below pre-pandemic levels, despite all restrictions being lifted. Reports in *The Times* have said that timetables may never return to their pre-pandemic levels. Will the Minister deny that? If so, will she state when our rail services will get back to full operation?

The Government pay lip service to our public transport, without delivering the funding needed for the network to deliver. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East has gone into great detail on many issues that I have not been able to raise, but it is worth mentioning that former MP Tracy Brabin, who is now the Mayor of West Yorkshire, is really tackling these issues head-on. She is looking at public control and bringing in simpler fares, contactless ticketing and greener buses.

I want to finish by urging the Government to adhere to the excellent and eloquent request from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East for better buses—or whatever we call them these days. The overarching thing that all MPs want is to deliver on the transport needs of their constituents, and the Government really have to set out a proper, joined-up strategy, as my hon. Friend discussed earlier. They particularly need to look at the different pieces of the jigsaw, because transport is very complicated and can be a barrier to employment, but we know it can also give access to employment. My hon. Friend said that we have been given London-type powers, and now the Government have to commit to both a strategy and London-type resources for our cities.

2.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Sharma. It is also a pleasure to respond to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) because, as has already been said, his commitment to his area, and the work that he has done with the South Yorkshire bus review, really is commendable, particularly as there were around 5,900 respondents to the review. We very much appreciate the ambition for improving transport in his area, and particularly the commitment to public transport. He set out really effectively the challenges, benefits and opportunities, and I am certainly committed to creating a future transport system that works for everyone everywhere.

I note the envy expressed by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) of my role. I can only say that much of the work is devolved and I would welcome more collaborative working with him on this subject and particularly on decarbonisation and the future of transport, because the climate sees no boundaries. I am sure that, where Scotland is exceeding, we can learn lessons right across the UK, and that many lessons can be learned from other parts of the UK as well, so I reiterate that willingness to continue to work together.

We would also like to see safer streets, smoother journeys and better infrastructure to help create a cleaner, quieter, less congested transport system, and we recognise the part that public transport and active travel will play in that regard. Ahead are major environmental challenges that we need to meet head-on, as has been discussed, and we have set really high ambitions. They range from the Government's commitment in 2019 to achieving net zero by 2050, through to the announcement in 2020 of the phasing out of petrol and diesel cars in recognition that that is where the bulk of emissions in the transport sector come from, the publication of the transport decarbonisation plan in July 2021 and, just last Friday, to put more flesh on the bones of that, the publication of our electric vehicle infrastructure strategy.

I think that we have covered the breadth of transport systems during this debate. Let me focus on buses and public transport. The pandemic has meant that travel demand across local transport networks has changed with the emergence of new travel patterns, while the sector is continuing to deal with the ongoing effects of the pandemic and financial challenges remain. The Government understand the importance of local transport networks. That is why we have supported the bus, tram and light rail sectors through a variety of emergency and recovery grants, totalling almost £2 billion. Furthermore, we have negotiated an extension to the current recovery funding packages, providing more than £150 million in extra support to the local transport sector.

In March 2021, we published England's long-term national bus strategy, and we have set out a bold vision for bus services across the country. At the Budget, we announced £1.2 billion of dedicated funding for bus transformation deals, and that is part of £3 billion of new spend on buses over this Parliament. We will announce more details on how the funding will be allocated very soon. With regard to zero-emission buses, there are currently nearly 2,000 zero-emission buses on the roads, and we have £198 million to support 943 zero-emission buses.¹ We remain committed to supporting the introduction of 4,000 zero-emission buses, with more than £535 million of funding available in this Parliament to support climate ambitions, improve transport for local communities and supply high-quality green jobs.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East referenced what is happening in his community with ITM Power, one of the leading hydrogen providers. That is exactly what we are looking for for aviation, maritime and rail. For aspects of the transport system that cannot easily be electrified, we will be looking to hydrogen as one solution. I look forward to an upcoming visit to ITM. I would welcome his joining me on that visit.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for that invitation. I am very hopeful that I can come with her on the visit. To go back to the £3 billion in improvement funding,

she has just said that £1.2 billion, I think, will be allocated shortly. A ministerial "shortly" does not always happen very quickly, but anyway, it will be shortly. Is she therefore saying that the rest of the £3 billion has not been spent on the covid measures, that £1.8 billion is left and that authorities will be able to bid for that in the course of this Parliament?

Trudy Harrison: Let me provide the exact detail on the millions and billions—how they have been allocated already and how they will be allocated—in much more detail in writing, because I do not want to get that wrong and I am not the Minister for buses. If the hon. Gentleman will allow me the time to provide a more detailed response, I will make sure we get it absolutely spot on.

I have set out our commitment to buses, but the hon. Gentleman has also referenced the importance of light rail, which is a lifeline for communities right across the UK and offers a particular advantage for decarbonisation as we look towards the future of transport. Later this year, I very much hope, we will bring in legislation that will provide further opportunities for self-driving vehicles and the future of transport using technology. During the pandemic, the Government allocated over £250 million in funding to support six light rail operators and local transport authorities in England outside of London. From April 2022, we will provide over £100 million of additional support to the bus, light rail and tram sector for six months—the trials that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. There will be a decision imminently.

Mr Betts: Is that sooner than "shortly"?

Trudy Harrison: Imminently is shorter than "in due course". I wish I could tell the hon. Gentleman today—*[Interruption.]* That was not a note confirming that I can tell him right now, sadly, but if he holds his patience a little while longer, we will be able to provide information on the total package of support and how much money will be available for light rail.

We have set out a wide range of ambitions and commitments across all modes of transport during this Parliament. The levelling-up fund, which is worth £4.8 billion for the UK, will invest in local transport infrastructure such as bypasses and other local road schemes, bus lanes and railway station upgrades. As a result of the 2021 spending review, successful bids from round 1 of the levelling-up fund will see £1.7 billion invested in 105 local infrastructure projects across the UK. That funding, which is to be spent by March 2025, includes over £77 million awarded to authorities across the north. For example, Liverpool city region will receive £37 million to deliver high-quality segregated walking and cycling routes in some of the region's most deprived areas.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North also referenced active travel. I have to disagree with him; we are spending six times the amount of funding on dedicated cycling and walking infrastructure. The Prime Minister's Gear Change plan is possibly one of the greatest health interventions that this Government have made. We have established Active Travel England; we are developing an interim board, and we will make sure that future cycle infrastructure aligns with LTN 1/20, to ensure that cycle infrastructure is fit for purpose and of the highest quality. That will be happening right

1. *[Official Report, 21 April 2022, Vol. 712, c. 6MC.]*

[Trudy Harrison]

across the country, making sure that it is as relevant for villages—which is important to me, because I live in one—as it is for towns and cities. The Prime Minister has set out his ambition that by 2030, half of all journeys in towns and cities will be walked or cycled. That is commendable, and I am delighted to be the Minister leading on that ambition with colleagues and partnerships right across the country.

The Department has recently published our integrated rail plan for the north and midlands, which sets out that £96 billion will be spent—the biggest ever single Government investment in Britain’s rail network. In January 2020, the Government pledged £500 million for the Restoring Your Railway fund to start reopening lines and stations to reconnect smaller communities, regenerate local economies and improve access to jobs, homes and education. I have heard the request from the hon. Member for Sheffield South East that we consider light rail in some of these areas rather than heavy rail, and I know he has met with my colleague in the Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who is the rail Minister. We have heard those requests and they make a lot of sense.

Mr Betts: I appreciate this is not the Minister’s area, but the rail Minister has helpfully agreed to meet me specifically about the Barrow Hill scheme. I wondered whether at some point the Department is going to publish a review of the Tram Train pilot and indicate how it sees it being rolled out across the country in general.

Trudy Harrison: Absolutely. We would not do these pilots if they were not about learning lessons and publishing those lessons learned. The Government cannot do this on our own; we depend on our partners, our arm’s length bodies, our executive agencies, local authorities, local communities, businesses and, in particular, the private sector and transport operators to ensure that we get this right. I am absolutely confident that that will be the case. When I write to the hon. Gentleman, I will be sure to include the timeline I expect for that publication.

On city region sustainable transport settlements, we will deliver £5.7 billion of investment so that city regions can upgrade local transport to boost growth, level up and decarbonise transport, with £3 billion going to city regions across the north to support a number of transport interventions, including tram and light rail. Some £570 million has been allocated to the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority to improve schemes such as the renewal of the Supertram network across Sheffield and Rotherham.

I have already talked about the integrated rail plan, and I will reflect briefly on roads. The issue has not been discussed specifically in this debate, but we need to recognise that cyclists use roads, and that roads are fundamental to much of our decarbonisation, which is why we are to invest £24 billion in England’s strategic road network. That substantial package will benefit strategic roads around the country, including in the north.

On walking and cycling, I have already set out Active Travel England’s priorities, which are being drawn up, and the Prime Minister’s ambitions. Statistics show that 68% of journeys are less than five miles, which is why we

have launched our ambitious plans to boost walking and cycling in England. For the 2021 spending review period, £710 million of new dedicated funding for walking and cycling was announced. That, taking other funding streams into account, delivers the £2 billion of funding for walking and cycling over this Parliament to which I referred.

As we invest in local infrastructure and make changes to the transport sector, we will work in partnership with local transport authorities and operators to achieve the best outcomes for all transport users. We are updating local transport plan guidance to support local transport authorities to bring their plans into line with Government priorities. The Department will publish additional guidance on quantifiable carbon reductions in local transport, in line with our commitments in the transport decarbonisation plan, to make that a fundamental part of local transport planning and funding.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North also discussed the charging network. In the electric vehicle infrastructure strategy, we referred to a revolution that will work for everyone, everywhere. We already have in excess of 30,000 public charge points in the UK, of which more than 5,400 are rapid. We have a plan to guarantee that there will be at least six rapid chargers in excess of 150 kW at all 114 motorway service areas in England. That is in addition to the hundreds of thousands of charge points already installed on driveways, with many more hundreds of thousands to come. We recognise that we need at least 10 times the number of charge points across the country to support the revolution from a fossil fuel transport system to a decarbonised one.

Mr Betts: I did not talk about electric vehicles, as this debate is about public transport, but as the owner of one myself, I know the frustration of not having enough charge points to go to and therefore having to work out a route. The Minister mentioned rapid charging. When I get to a charging point, often it is not that rapid because the grid does not deliver sufficient power. It is a point I have raised with the Transport Secretary before, which he accepted. Will the Government take that up with the grid? Until it gets that right, someone can turn up to a charging point and find that charging takes three or four times as long as it should, which is incredibly frustrating.

Trudy Harrison: I am delighted that the hon. Member has given me the opportunity to talk more about how we are rolling out the electric vehicle infrastructure strategy. It is not just about the number of chargers; we recognise that a broken charger is as much use as a chocolate fireguard. That is why we are mandating that there is open data, 99% reliability by charge point operators, transparent pricing, and the ability to pay by contactless, rather than having to download yet another app.

On generation and connection, we are working with Ofgem and identifying the ways in which we can secure reservations, particularly for motorway service areas, where we will need to future-proof with a “dig once” approach, particularly as we look forward to the introduction of heavy goods vehicles using battery-electric technology.

We recognise that we need a lot more chargers, particularly in areas outside of London. We recognise the need for reliability, which will be mandated for charge-point operators. We also recognise that people

need to know where chargers are and when they are available. That is all being mandated, and we are bringing forward further legislation later this year.

We are working with Ofgem, National Grid, the distribution network operators across the country and, most importantly, local authorities, because they are our greatest partner in ensuring that a consistent charge point infrastructure is available for people who do not have driveways. We must be able to say, “No driveway is no problem”. That is why we have funds available for homeowners, businesses, local authorities, motorway service areas and purchasers, with plug-in grants across cars, vans and heavy goods vehicles. Our ambition is matched only by the financial incentivisation we are providing to people to make the most of the transition.

Gill Furniss: Like the Minister, I am more familiar with this matter than with buses—I am not a bus person. I want to ask about VAT rates on community charging. At the moment, it is just 5% VAT for people with a drive and 20% for people who charge their cars in the community. Not that I want the debate to go on much longer because I have a train to catch, but I have reservations about how community charging can be done. A lot of people I have spoken to say that chargers could probably be fitted into lamp posts. How will we do that on “Coronation Street”-type streets, where we are trying to discourage people from parking on pavements? Are people going to form a queue? Is there going to be a street brawl if someone has been parked next to a lamp post for a long time? I see chaos abounding if we do not get this right first time, so I welcome the Minister’s views on the matter.

Trudy Harrison: That point requires a longer debate; I would welcome the opportunity to talk more about it. In the first instance, I recommend that the hon. Member look at our recently published electric vehicle infrastructure strategy, because much of how we will do that is in there. We are also working with pioneers and inventors; in this country, we have shown time and again that we are up for the challenge. This is a nation of innovation that is abundant with engineers who find solutions to some of the grand challenges that we face. I have every confidence that we will find solutions to these difficulties. Some of that is set out in the electric vehicle infrastructure strategy.

We are working with organisations such as Motability to ensure that we have an inclusive revolution that works for everyone, everywhere. Through the initiatives

I have described, it is clear that we are supporting local areas to drive forward the improvements they need, while moving towards a greener and more prosperous future. This Government are determined to create a great, green transport network that is available to everyone, everywhere, and that spreads opportunity and prosperity to all.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield South East for allowing me the opportunity to respond to this interesting debate, in which Members from across the House have demonstrated the importance of public—and, indeed, all—transport.

2.35 pm

Mr Betts: I thank all three contributors to the debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) and the Minister. It has been a good, wide-ranging debate that has gone further than my initial contribution, including a discussion of electric vehicles and active travel, which I did not mention but recognise the importance of. Of course, we also spoke about the rail challenges in Sheffield and the north in general, on which we could have several other debates if we had time.

There is recognition that public transport in urban areas is an essential lifeline for so many people, but it is also vital for the wider public in all our communities because it helps us to tackle the problem of congestion, the challenge of climate change and the real dangers of pollution; all three can be tackled by getting more people on public transport, improving the quality of public transport and making it greener.

I think there is general agreement on what the challenges are and on what, ideally, we would like to see done to meet them. The question that remains, as always, is: will the resources be made available to enable the necessary actions to be implemented? We have not addressed that challenge fully today, but I am sure it is one to which we will return in future debates.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future funding of urban transport.

2.37 pm

Sitting suspended.

Food Security

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered food security.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for recognising the importance of food security and allowing this debate. A debate on food security was needed before the crisis in Ukraine, and it is even more urgent now. Before I turn to issues of food security in the UK, I want to address the situation in Ukraine, which remains absolutely critical.

Our immediate focus must be on doing everything possible to support the people of Ukraine and address their humanitarian needs. Russia's brutal war is now into its second month. The United Nations World Food Programme estimates that at least 30% of the Ukrainian population is in dire need of lifesaving food assistance, and early data indicates that 90% of the people remaining in the country could face extreme poverty, should the war deepen even further.

Of course, the humanitarian emergency does not end in Ukraine. We urgently need to get to grips with the real threat of a global food shortage. Russia and Ukraine are ranked among the top three global exporters of wheat, maize, rapeseed, sunflower seeds, sunflower oil and fertiliser. There were already food shortages in parts of north and east Africa, which sourced almost all of its imported wheat from those two countries.

Ukraine is also the single biggest supplier of food to the World Food Programme, which might be forced to cut distribution in places such as Yemen, Chad and Niger, while taking on the feeding of millions of hungry people in and around Ukraine. According to WFP officials, all of that points to 2022 being a year of catastrophic hunger. Without urgent funding, the programme's director predicts a hell on earth in some of the most impoverished regions in the world, potentially resulting in famine and destabilisation in parts of Africa and the middle east, as well as mass migration.

The scale of the crisis cannot be understated, so I am eager to hear any indications at all from the Minister of how the UK Government are preparing for such a global security emergency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There is another thing that exacerbates the issue. If the Ukrainians are to put the harvest in, they have 10 days from now to do it. That focuses attention on where the problems are.

Deidre Brock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That point very much sharpens our minds.

An immediate reversal of the cut to foreign aid might be an obvious first step to help with all of this, but we need to go even further if we are to prevent the hell on earth that the UN has warned of. At the same time we need to examine how best we safeguard domestic food security by supporting our farmers, producers and consumers while continuing to uphold our commitments to sustainable, nature-friendly food production. Even before the war in Ukraine and the sanctions on Russia, our farmers faced a tidal wave of costs for fertiliser, fuel, energy, seed and feed.

The price of fuel, which continues to play a critical role in UK food production and infrastructure, has risen even further as a result of the war, and farmers who were already warning of increasing fertiliser costs have seen the Russian invasion send prices rocketing even further. Yes, we need to reduce our reliance on artificial fertilisers, pesticides and fuel in food production and agriculture, and tackle the many challenges that, as Nature Friendly Farming reminds us, are the result of "a global food system that is already in crisis",

but the transition to sustainable, holistic food systems will not happen overnight.

Ministers recently suggested that there is enough manure and slurry to compensate for the fertiliser price increases, but that suggests a lack of understanding of what is actually happening on the ground. Are the Government considering securing the supply of fertiliser for UK farmers, at least in the short term, by subsidising costs and protecting the ability to produce the 40% of fertiliser produced domestically? I am interested in the Minister's answer to that.

On top of that, as the National Farmers Union of Scotland and others have highlighted, grain price increases will impact on both the costs of livestock production and shop prices for consumers. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recently acknowledged that the price of wheat, which the pig and poultry sectors rely on heavily for feed, had already doubled since Russia's invasion.

Meanwhile, with Ukrainian workers making up around 60% of seasonal agricultural staff, the war is compounding the existing labour crisis in the industry. The Scottish National party has asked repeatedly for immigration to be devolved to Scotland—so far to no avail—but at the very least we want to see immigration policy greatly overhauled, so that we can set up the humane and practical approach that, among other benefits, would see us attract the seasonal and permanent staff that our industries require. Agriculture was already suffering from post-Brexit shortages of such workers, as well as haulage drivers and processing staff. That was the message that the Scottish Affairs Committee heard loud and clear on our recent visit to horticulturists and soft fruit providers in Perthshire and near Dundee.

This all points to the great likelihood of reduced yields, with a knock-on impact on supply. I am already hearing of Angus farmers deciding not to plant wheat this year because the costs do not make it viable any more, and of others forced to reduce their livestock numbers. If that is repeated across the country, there will be far-reaching implications not just for farmers, but for food processors and manufacturers, and ultimately for prices in supermarkets.

Of course, millions of households across the UK were already struggling with soaring food bills long before the crisis in Ukraine. A 2018 report by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation revealed that 2.2 million people in the UK were severely food-insecure—the highest reported rate in Europe—and the situation has worsened since the pandemic. The Food Foundation reports that the percentage of food-insecure households increased from around 7.5% pre-covid to almost 11% by January 2022, affecting nearly 6 million adults and 2.5 million children. That is a national scandal and is set to intensify, with the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasting the

biggest annual fall in living standards since records began in 1956. The Food and Drink Federation reminds us that February 2022 saw the highest rate of food inflation in a decade, with folk on the lowest incomes, who spend more of their household budget on food and fuel, hit the hardest, as seems to happen so often. Worryingly, the forecasts do not yet account for the possible effects of the conflict in Ukraine on food or other commodity prices. The FDF estimates that cost rises could take seven to 12 months to feed into consumer prices.

These cold, hard statistics reflect a bleak reality in which more and more households are indeed being forced to choose between eating and heating. Unbelievably in 2020s Britain, we are hearing of food bank users declining potatoes and root vegetables because they cannot afford to boil them, so it was disappointing that the Chancellor's spring statement made what I have to describe as very little effort to grapple with food insecurity and poverty. The increase in cash in the household support fund is of course welcome, but I am afraid that it is nowhere near adequate. The Trussell Trust, the UK's largest network of food banks, has warned that the failure to bring benefits in line with inflation will drive more people to emergency food parcels. The Chancellor protests that he cannot do everything to help the UK's poorest households, but uprating benefits is one thing that he could do right now as a lifeline for some of our most vulnerable constituents, and I beg him to do something about it immediately.

Unfortunately, I have to say that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions did not seem to recognise the link between the benefit system and food security. At a Work and Pensions Committee hearing last month, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) cited a 2018 study showing that the poorest tenth of English households would have to spend 74% of their disposable income if they followed the Government's guidelines for a healthy diet, compared with just 6% for the wealthiest decile. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions repeatedly opted not to respond to the points raised by my hon. Friend, deferring to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on these issues.

I was therefore very pleased that the media reported last night that the Minister responding to us today would be chairing a crisis meeting this morning to discuss food prices and related issues. The Minister looks puzzled, but it was in *The Guardian* last night—I am sure she will be able to address that when she responds. We look forward to hearing more about that, and we certainly look forward to hearing about the outcomes and the actions that the Government will take to address the shocking reality of food poverty and inequality. Those in DEFRA really must work more closely on this issue with their counterparts in the Department for Work and Pensions. According to the Trussell Trust, 47% of people using food banks are indebted to the DWP, and yet it has taken until this year to add questions related to food aid to the DWP's family resources survey. That is a pretty sorry oversight. The response to the pandemic has shown that holistic, cross-departmental action can be mobilised when the moment calls. Given the scale of this crisis and the confluence of threats, we must see a similar approach taken to food security both domestically and internationally.

The Scottish Government issued a position statement on a human rights approach to tackling food insecurity in February 2021. In October, they began a consultation on a national plan to end the need for food banks; they have introduced the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, which lays the foundation for Scotland to become a good food nation. I look forward to hearing from the Minister that there are similar levels of commitment to similar actions from the UK Government. I also look forward to hearing when their overdue response to the national food strategy can be expected. A Scottish food security and supply taskforce has been set up jointly; it will meet frequently over the coming weeks to identify and respond to disruption to food security and supply resulting from the war in Ukraine. I am interested to hear from the Minister whether an equivalent is being set up by the UK Government.

We really do need to prioritise self-sufficiency once again and support our farmers to sustainably maintain production levels. NFU Scotland and many others have also warned about the domestic impact of what many see as a *laissez-faire* approach to post-Brexit trade deals and importing cheap foods with lower environmental and animal welfare standards. We should be building resilience in domestic food production, not threatening it.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): That point comes to the heart of the matter. With the rising import costs about which the hon. Lady has already spoken, there comes a danger of reduced productivity. That means that there is a gap in the market, which then stands to be filled by those cheaper imports. For that reason, this really is a moment of existential crisis for the UK's agriculture industry. How does the hon. Lady think that can be avoided?

Deidre Brock: I am going to make some suggestions shortly, but we are hearing across a number of different organisations in agriculture and the agricultural industry sector that extra support for our farmers must be given—and given very soon.

Mr Carmichael: I promise that this is the last time that I shall intervene. Supermarkets have a crucial role in the setting of farm-gate prices. We have the Groceries Code Adjudicator, but it needs more teeth to do the job that we want it to do.

Deidre Brock: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. NFUs across the UK have been calling for that for some time. It will be interesting to hear the Minister's answer to that point. Another consequence of Brexit is that UK farmers will miss out on access to the EU's proposed €1.5 billion fund to counter food insecurity. The SNP thinks that food security funds equivalent to what UK farmers would have received as part of the EU should be established immediately; that would certainly go towards helping some of the problems that farmers and agricultural industries are experiencing at the moment. The funds should be appropriately allocated to the different Governments of the four nations.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West pointed out yesterday to the Prime Minister, we must also make serious efforts to cut down on our food waste. Over 2 million tonnes of edible food is wasted on farms and in factories every year. There was a scheme introduced in 2019 to help farmers get food to charities and reach those in need; it was successful but its funding

[Deidre Brock]

has not been renewed. I am hoping that the Government and the Minister will be able to give us some assurance that they are listening to the calls from Feeding Britain, Good Food Scotland and FareShare that those initiatives be continued.

Many of us have been warning about our food security for years, particularly in the face of Brexit. Frankly, it always seemed like we were being ignored. The crisis in Ukraine has dramatically thrust this issue centre stage. However, we have to remember that there were systemic issues both at home and abroad. We need to build resilience into the farming system for the long term, not lurch from one crisis to the next—as the Sustain alliance rightly says. I am fully aware that this is a very difficult balancing act for all Governments, but the thistle must be grasped. The consequences of failing to act are just too terrible to contemplate.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4.30 pm. There are seven Members seeking to contribute and I want to ensure that everybody gets in, so we will have a six-minute limit. I will call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 3.58 pm and the guideline limits are 10 minutes for the SNP, 10 minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition, 10 minutes for the Minister and then Deidre Brock will have two or three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. So we have a six-minute limit straightaway. I call Neil Parish.

3.15 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I say to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) that it is a great thing that she has secured today's debate on food security. Like her and many others in the House, I have talked a lot about food security, which is now more necessary than ever. I, like her, want to talk a little about what is happening in Ukraine and about global food security.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has put Ukrainian agriculture under threat and issues with food security are being inflicted on the Ukrainian people, who are also dealing with a murderous invading force. Ukrainian farm workers have been deployed to fight on the frontline; infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, has been damaged, making it hard for goods to be transported across the country; and there are fuel shortages, as usually Ukraine gets 70% of its petrol and diesel from Russia and Belarus.

There is also a risk that the conflict may disrupt or stop the spring planting season, which is due to start now. There is shrapnel in the field, which will cause problems for farm machinery, and President Zelensky himself recently said that Russian troops are mining fields in Ukraine, blowing up agricultural machinery and destroying fuel reserves needed for sowing, which is absolutely dreadful. The President has said that Ukraine has access to around one year's supply of food. That creates problems for food security beyond that time period and has a knock-on effect on global food security, because Ukraine needs to stockpile what it would normally export.

Ukraine produces a sixth of the world's corn exports, 20% of global maize, 50% of global sunflower oil and 12% of the world's wheat exports. The Black sea port in

the south of Ukraine has now been completely shut down, taking about 12% of global wheat out of the market. Around 400 million people across north Africa and the middle east rely on wheat from Ukraine.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly important point and what he is setting out is deeply concerning. Hunger already kills more people than HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined, even before we got into the current situation. Does he agree that that points towards a need for urgent action?

Neil Parish: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I will go on to make the case that in order to ensure global food security and food security in this country, it is essential for us to produce more food, so that the gap left by Ukraine being unable to export to Africa and other countries can be filled by others and ourselves, if possible. That really is an issue.

Around 400 million people across north Africa and the middle east rely on wheat from Ukraine. Countries such as Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya import over 50% of the wheat their people eat every year, and 75% of Lebanon's wheat comes from Ukraine. These countries are having to take steps to try to produce more wheat at home in difficult conditions, or to find new sources from other countries. In the past 10 days, several countries have introduced restrictions on the export of grain and vegetable oils, including Lebanon, Egypt, Hungary, Serbia, Moldova, Algeria, Turkey and Indonesia.

With millions of people already living in poverty around the world, we could soon face a great humanitarian crisis. The African Development Bank says it is planning to raise \$1 billion to boost wheat production in Africa alone and avert potential food shortages. It is going to fund new technologies to try to help African countries to grow cereals, which is normally difficult in those conditions. I hope the Government do what they can to support those efforts.

Fertiliser costs are rising. We all know that the situation in Ukraine is also having an impact on food security in this country. Agriculture relies on specific imports to produce food, including fuel, fertiliser and feed. The cost of those imports varies each year, and farmers are very much at the mercy of the market when it comes to the prices of those imports. We have seen a perfect storm, with all of these spiking at the same time due to global events; when profit margins are already low, big price rises can practically put farmers out of business. The prices of feed and fertiliser are particularly volatile, and represent farmers' most significant expenses.

The situation in Ukraine has disrupted supplies of potash—a key ingredient in fertiliser that is mass produced in Russia and Belarus. That, combined with rising gas prices, is pushing up the cost of fertiliser, with wholesale gas prices up 500% from a year ago and 40% since the invasion of Ukraine. Farmers may face some very difficult decisions about how much fertiliser they use, because £1,000 a tonne—a jump of £245 from a year ago—is not affordable. Those prices cannot be absorbed by farmers, and if we are going to produce more food in this country, the basic fact is that we need to use enough fertiliser.

I welcome DEFRA's announcement this week that the Government will clarify how the Environment Agency will apply the farming rules for water to allow spreading of slurry in the autumn, and I congratulate the Minister for her work in that area—it is very good news, and long awaited. I also welcome that any changes to the use of urea will be delayed by a year, given the crisis we are in. Over the long term, there is scope for moving towards more organic fertilisers. We can look at other forms of fertiliser, such as using dry leachate from biodigestion plants, but all of this is coming, and we need to deal with ammonium nitrate now. I welcome the decision to put an extra £20 million into the farming innovation programme to come up with new solutions.

3.21 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone, and I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for introducing this debate. Food security is more important than ever and it is good to see the same old faces in this Chamber debating it, although there should not just be those same old faces—*[Interruption.]* Those same familiar faces, I should say. This needs to be an issue that all 650 MPs feel they should be speaking about. It is good to see my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), and Government colleagues who I recognise from debates of old, but we need to make sure that food security is not just an issue for people who bang on about farming, like myself and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish). We need to make sure it is put into plain English and put further up the political league table of issues; if we do not, we will be talking only to ourselves. We need to make sure that our advocacy and the message we send in this debate is felt much more widely than just by us here, who probably all agree on these issues.

Food security matters more than ever because food is becoming more insecure for so many people in Britain and around the world. Food prices are up, food poverty is up, and the Government's food strategy has been delayed yet again. I am afraid that this ramshackle approach to food security will not do: we must do better. All of us have walked into supermarkets recently and seen the increase in prices.

Jack Monroe has argued successfully and powerfully that the increase in food prices is greatest for some of the food that costs the least, so it has a bigger impact on the budgets of people who have the least. There has been some progress in that area, but not enough. It is getting harder and harder for people to afford food. I know that the Minister is not solely responsible for this—she might be responsible for food, but often what we are talking about is poverty. However, food prices are now going up. The argument that food poverty was not about food, but about poverty, might have held water in the past, but now it is about food prices going up as well as poverty going up. We need to find a much better way of addressing both those issues.

There are a number of issues I want to speak about in the time that remains to me, now that I have finished ranting. We need to recognise that food security is affecting each and every one of our communities. There are now more food banks in this country than branches of McDonald's. Let us be clear: each of those food

banks—those emergency food provisions, the food larders—is testament to the generosity and kindness of that community, but none of them should exist, because we should have a system in which everyone can afford to feed themselves, the energy to cook that meal, and the housing that goes with it. It is shameful that in the 21st century, we are in a position where so many people in our communities are unable to afford the most basic of food.

We know that from tomorrow, with the Government's national insurance tax rise and with energy prices going up by £700 for huge numbers of people in our communities, more and more people will be pushed into poverty, and more and more children will be going to bed in the evening not having eaten. When I was volunteering with the soup run recently in Plymouth, I spoke to a gentleman who said, "I am in work. I come to the soup run because I spend my wages giving my kids a meal. I put them to bed and, once I know they are asleep, I come to the soup run so I can get some food." It is utterly shameful that that is happening in our society. There are some brilliant people working in this space, but it is shameful.

Food security is not just a moral issue; it should be about our national security as well. I would like food security to feature in the Government's national security strategy. I want a decent mention of it in the revised integrated review—which must come, because the current integrated review is so out of date. If we are to have that, let us have an ambition to rear, grow and catch more food in Britain. We produce only about 60% of our domestic produce. I am not arguing that we should grow food that we do not have the ability to grow; I am arguing that, where we do have the ability to grow and catch food, we should grow and catch more of it. It would be good for not only Britain, but our jobs, rural and coastal areas, cutting carbon and higher standards.

I would like the Government to adopt Labour's policy of "make, buy and sell more in Britain", which is about not just British steel in warships, but food. If we do that, we will be supporting many of the farmers who are facing real struggles due to higher input prices and the stagnant prices paid by supermarkets, and who are potentially being undercut by suppliers growing cheaper food to lower standards abroad, which are allowed access to the UK because of really poor trade deals signed by the Government.

We need food security to be a national security issue, but we also need to recognise that there is too much wasted food. We must put greater pressure on the supermarkets—so much food is wasted along the supply chain before it gets to the shelf. We all have a responsibility to use the food we buy to make sure it is not going in the bin, but we must also cut out food waste along the way. Like energy companies, supermarkets have for far too long been getting away with prices that are too high. I would like the Minister to use her powers to address that.

There is a good argument for a right to food and for plans for food security, to grow more food in the UK and to make food and energy more affordable. If we do not do that, more families will slip into hunger and poverty.

3.27 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I always enjoy following the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton

[Anthony Mangnall]

and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and, increasingly, hearing him rant. He is right on many of the points he raises and he is a fastidious supporter of farming and fishing in his community and across the south-west. I particularly enjoy working with him on this topic. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) on securing this hugely important debate.

The two things that have really focused people's minds about food security have been the situation in Ukraine and the pandemic. The scorched-earth tactics being used in Ukraine will have the knock-on impact raised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). These horrendous global shocks and events are giving us a moment of pause, contemplation and thought as to how we can improve food security in the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport is absolutely right: there need to be more faces in this Chamber debating this issue. I hope we will see an improvement from the food security report, as set out in the Agriculture Act 2020, that the DEFRA Secretary will present this autumn. Can the Minister confirm that the report will be presented on the Floor of the House of Commons, and that we will have the opportunity to challenge and question it, as well as discuss the lessons that might be learned from it?

Due to the pandemic, for the first time in my generation, we saw empty shelves and the fact that our global supply chains are incredibly fragile. It is important to say that we were not alone in that. I do not necessarily take the view that it was just caused by Brexit—a number of other countries in Europe found themselves in similar situations. However, it emphasised the need for us to act and to act fast, and to consider that we need more at-home production, fewer faceless suppliers and to talk up what we have.

Food of incredible quality comes out of my constituency in south Devon, in the form of fish and shellfish as well as the meat and dairy that is produced. The quality is extraordinary. There is an abundance of food in our seas and on our land. The high quality of what we produce is known across the world. However, we talk it down so often. We have to change that approach; ending that stigma about British food quality should be a top priority for any Member of Parliament and anyone in agriculture.

At the same time, we also have to think about how we introduce the conversation around food and farming in our schools, ensuring that young people can get on to our farms and on to our fishing boats to understand where food comes from, how we produce it and how we can do so in an environmentally responsible way. These things are incredibly important.

There is also the issue of seasonal variety. At the moment, our food security sits at about 65%. Now, whether or not we have a target that pushes us up to 75% or 80% is for Members of this House to discuss, but it is not something that I am inherently against, because at least we can then have the national ambition to ensure that all parts of the United Kingdom are producing food, so that we can be reassured about our food security.

My fourth point is that we spend a lot of time talking about rewilding. I myself spend a lot of time talking about regenerative agriculture and there is much

conversation to be had about the intensification of farming. However, we have to find the balance between rewilding, intensive farming and food productivity. My biggest concern is that the environmental land management scheme that is replacing the basic payment scheme says absolutely nothing about public money for public good being about food production. Can we please update it and make sure that farmers in my constituency know that the new scheme is about not only rewilding and biodiversity, which of course are important, but food production, and that they will be supported in producing food?

Many other points have been made already, but I will just make two more quickly. First, I am always happy to bash supermarkets. They have an enormous responsibility. However, the fact that none of the supermarkets in the area of Brixham, the most valuable fishing port in England, stock any fish from that port is staggering. So we need to use the procurement Bill, when it comes before this House, to ensure that supermarkets are incentivised to buy first from local suppliers, in order to support the local economy and create a circular economy so that our farmers, fishermen, local producers, butchers, bakers and greengrocers can all benefit.

Secondly, I sit on the International Trade Committee and I spend a lot of time scrutinising the trade deals that we are making. I understand the reluctance and the hesitancy around the deals that we are striking, but we are making progress and improving how we conduct the negotiations. The agreement that we have come to with New Zealand is significantly different from our agreement with Australia. The intention for what we want to do in the Gulf also provides the opportunity for British producers to export, which is what our focus should be on. All too often, we talk about the import impact; we should talk about the ability to have an export impact. Our producers can achieve that by scaling up exports, which would benefit all our constituencies.

I respect the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith for bringing this issue to the House because it is an important one that needs focusing on, and because I think there is commonality across the House about ensuring that we do better on food security and ensuring that we can help those on the poverty line who use foodbanks by producing more food that is healthier and better for people, including for children in school.

I will leave it at that.

3.33 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First of all, I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for setting the scene so very well. I do not agree with all her comments in relation to Brexit, of course; she knows that. However, I understand the importance of this debate. When she said to me, “Jim, can you come down to the debate?”, I said, “Yes, I definitely will, because I want to make a contribution.” That is because my constituency of Strangford is a food producer that produces way above what we use, which I will refer to later.

I am aware that we are perceived as a nation that has plenty of food; unlike some countries, where there is not enough food to go round, we have an ample supply. The UN has a goal of zero hunger by 2030 and produced a report to that effect. The UN has said:

“The latest edition of that report, which was published mid-2021, estimated that between 720 and 811 million people went hungry in 2020. High costs and low affordability also mean billions cannot eat healthily or nutritiously. Considering the middle of the projected range (768 million), 118 million more people were facing hunger in 2020 than in 2019”.

Those are the figures when it comes to food security, because I believe that our obligation is not just to ourselves and people back home—we have that obligation because we are constituency MPs—but to the rest of the world as well; we have a duty in that respect, too.

Other speakers have already touched on Ukraine; we know what the issues are very clearly. I understand that we want the war in Ukraine to finish as soon as possible, because that will mean getting some sort of normality back—not just in Ukraine, which is important, but to return to the food security we had before.

In Northern Ireland, we export 80% of our products across the UK and the world. I am thinking of Lakeland Dairies—the Minister might know many of these companies by name—which exports many products all over the world, and of Willowbrook Foods and Mash Direct. Those three companies alone, including those who work in them, probably create somewhere between 2,500 and 3,000 jobs in my constituency.

I am aware of the global problem, but I am also aware of the problem in this country and in my constituency. I will give a couple of examples, if I can, to reflect where we are back home as well. One teacher spoke to me recently about getting the threshold of benefits lowered this year, because she was concerned about her pupils. She said that she could see that pupils from working families were under pressure. How could she see that? During covid, she sat alongside her children as they ate their lunch together—that is what they are doing, as they are not yet back in the assembly hall—and she noticed a pattern among a few children, in terms of the amount and quality of their lunch in tandem with the time that wages are paid. She said to me:

“Jim, I believe that some of my children are hungry during school and it breaks my heart.”

That teacher has since taken to bringing in a bowl of fruit for the children. They are allowed to pick a piece to snack on at lunchtime, if they want. The school cannot fund that, but she does it because she is burdened and that is commendable—commendable, but also lamentable. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) referred to that, and others will.

No child in Strangford or anywhere across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland should be hungry, and a proportion of the population are now not entitled to benefits. Some are parents who have to tighten their belt when it comes to the groceries. My mother had four children, including me. She said that there were not enough potatoes in Comber to fill us. In Comber, they plant a lot of potatoes and they sell over Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the UK. I do not now show the excess of eating too many potatoes, but in my younger days perhaps I did—I used to be 17 stone, and am now a very trim 13 stone. I have got it down and will keep it that way, if I can.

This morning on the TV, people were talking about the prices in chip shops; this is an example. I am sure everyone saw it, but if they did not, try to watch it tonight if possible. Fish and chip shops are under incredible pressure. For every £100 they spent last year,

they now spend £150 this year. That is a 50% increase, and some chip shops will not be here—that is the fact of it.

I understand that growing children are voracious, but when we realise that it is cheaper to buy four packets of crisps than a bunch of bananas, we understand why children are nutritionally challenged and some have challenging weights. This would not be a debate if I did not mention the Northern Ireland protocol, but I do so because we have special challenges because of it.

Some companies do not want the hassle of the documentation resulting from the protocol, but those that bother charge more per item—not per shipment—to cover it. That has led to less variety and less ability to shop for value. People take what is on offer and scrape the pennies together to cover it, so £1 items are now £1.29—we do not have to be mathematicians to work it out, but that is a 29% increase. Children pay the price of the Northern Ireland protocol with the sacrifice of high-quality, affordable and nutritious food and its availability.

I always ask the Minister, and I ask again: have discussions with Cabinet colleagues to address the issue. In Cabinet Office questions today, the Minister gave the sort of response we want, but I believe in seeing the finished article, rather than the words.

Last year, the Trussell Trust provided some 79,000 parcels in total to children and adults in Northern Ireland. In all, 2.5 million food parcels were given out across the UK. I will finish with this comment: yes, we might be able to get access to food security as a nation, but families simply cannot do it all. The hungry child at lunch making do with half a sandwich and a yoghurt, while watching other children tuck into full meals, is a reality in my constituency and others. That needs to change radically. We have the capacity to do that, and we must have the will to do it as well.

Minister, I look to you—I always do, because you are a lady and a Minister who understands the issues—to work with colleagues to do the right thing and to make lives better.

3.39 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. To start with, I have no formal interest to declare but, for transparency, I should put it on the record that my wife's family are arable farmers and occasionally, for no remuneration, I help out on the family farm. Indeed, in the last summer recess, I thought that I had found a time when I would be able to enjoy the harvest, but, in inclement weather, it greatly amused my father-in-law instead to send me deep into the bowels of the combine to clean it out from the previous harvest—a job that I wish on nobody else.

The debate is important, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) on initiating it. I did not agree with every word she said and I expect that she would be pretty appalled if I did, but, as food security is a subject facing our nation, it is absolutely right and proper that we debate it this afternoon. Actually, I have agreed with a lot of points that hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber have made. I particularly enjoyed the more ranty elements from the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). I agree with him: we should be growing

[Greg Smith]

and producing more food domestically and we absolutely should be wasting considerably less, if not wasting no food whatever, here in our United Kingdom. Where I think we will probably diverge and disagree is in my belief that trade deals and the outlook of global Britain will be part of the categoric success, prosperity and future of British agriculture. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) said, we can export more and drive farmers to a point at which our debates about subsidy will not be relevant anymore, because we will have British agriculture in a place where it is genuinely profitable and sustainable. Subsidy is absolutely essential for the time being, but the end point must surely be profitability in British agriculture.

On the debate on how we produce more food in this country, I will not repeat many of the points eloquently made by other hon. and right hon. Members, not least the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), but my concern right now, which I look to my hon. Friend the Minister to work on across Government, is how we protect more of our agricultural land for food production.

This week, in the Government's welcome announcements about the use of urea and the farming rules for water, in which they also set out more detail on the sustainable farming incentive, they have shown that they can be flexible and rise to the challenge of global factors and other things that impact on our farming community. That flexibility needs to be shown not just in how we get to the end point of ELMS—the environmental land management schemes—but on the other factors, which are not necessarily in the gift of DEFRA but are in the gift of other Departments, that relate to protecting that land.

My example is solar farms. We had a good debate about large solar farms in Westminster Hall some weeks ago. There are a lot of applications for them in my constituency. The vast majority of people accept the need for the renewable energy sector to develop that technology and get us off fossil fuels. However, that cannot be at the cost of hundreds of thousands of acres of agricultural land—certainly thousands of acres of agricultural land in my own constituency. I must say that I take the planning consultants' defence that sheep can still be grazed underneath the solar panels with a very large pinch of salt, because of course if the fields have been covered with the plastic, glass and metal that make up the solar panels, I am not sure how they expect grass to grow underneath them. I urge the Minister to work with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in particular to work out a way to ensure that we get the solar technology that we need in this country, but on rooftops, factories and brownfield sites rather than taking away the precious agricultural land in our rural communities.

Very powerful and good points were made on both sides of the Chamber about food poverty. We are doing other things in Government—particularly through some of the provisions in the Health and Care Bill, which is on its way through Parliament—about high in fat, salt and sugar products, about “Buy one, get one free” offers and about where shopkeepers can and cannot place certain products in their shop and how they may be advertised. We need to acknowledge that that will

have a huge impact on the price of food and on the food bill when families get to the checkout. I am sure that all right hon. and hon. Members want to do something about the problem of childhood obesity. However, we must not do that in a way that, first, will not work, as the Government's own data shows—the advertising restrictions save only 1.7 calories a day—and will also drive up food bills. If we are to have food security in this country, and have affordable food for everyone, we must be wary of the unintended consequences of other policy areas.

We must look to other sources of meat. In the business statement earlier, I was happy to raise the point that six NHS hospitals are getting more game meat into their menus. I am sure that the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) will be delighted to hear this; we need to get more game meat into the food chain.

3.45 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for securing this important debate, which has never been more timely.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and I have been banging on about food security for the best part of two decades, as we were both Members of the European Parliament's agriculture committee. I was looking through the always informative and excellent newspaper, *The Scottish Farmer*, and came across this quote:

“Last week's events really brought home the fragility of the world we live in and our over-dependence on potentially disrupted...transport links,” said Mr Smith—

I am quoting myself here.

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): Has it really come to that?

Alyn Smith: It is great to see a fan of my early work.

“I believe the UK government authorities have been far too complacent about the security and stability of our food supplies...assuming that international transit networks and foreign sources of supply will never fail.

Last week was the mother of all wake-up calls.”

I said that in *The Scottish Farmer* on 29 April 2010, talking about the Icelandic volcano. However, I am afraid that the sentiment still applies and the lessons remain largely unlearned by the UK Government. I do not necessarily criticise our Minister in the Chamber but we all—all of us, collectively—must get food security far higher on our agenda. The lessons need to be learned.

I hope that I have proven over the years, that I am cross-party; I believe in consensus, and in working with other parties. I do not fabricate disagreement where there is none, but, damn sure, we disagree on food. We have a different sense of where we want to get to. We also have a food emergency on this Government's watch, and we urgently need to change course. I implore the Minister to take my suggestions seriously, because they are made in good faith.

Things have got worse in the last 20 years. The latest figures show that the UK's food self-sufficiency has gone from 80% to below 60%. Of course, we cannot and should not produce everything, but our food supply is under unprecedented strain. I believe that food security should be viewed as our national security is, and given

the same urgency and priority within Government. Anything that undermines food production, however well intentioned, should be viewed with extreme scepticism.

Food production must be the basis of the rural economy. Only profitable food businesses can form the bedrock of our rural economy. No amount of tourism, birdwatching or tree planting can replace it. Those are all important, but they are add-ons, not the basis or bedrock of our rural economy.

Kirsten Oswald: The points that my hon. Friend is making are extremely important, and really underlie all the reasons why the debate is so important. Is he aware that evidence suggests that in just over six decades, globally, over 30% of arable land has been degraded due to human-induced activities? The point that he is making is one that the Minister and all of us need to focus on.

Alyn Smith: I am grateful for the intervention. That is a very important point. There will always be conflict over land use; there will always be competing purposes, and we must be aware of the perverse incentives to take prime agricultural land out of food production. That would leave us more vulnerable to international shocks and not more resilient. We must put food production far higher on our agenda.

We have seen action after action that has made farming more difficult because of political decisions. The sector was already reeling from Brexit and covid, and now the dreadful events in Ukraine have every single light on farming's dashboard flashing red. The input costs for feed have gone up, and supply is becoming more difficult. Fuel costs—red diesel and gas—are all going up. Fertiliser costs are rocketing. Labour shortages are real, and are increasing costs—in fact, I would be grateful for the Minister's comments on the increase in the hourly wage to £10.10 an hour for seasonal workers, because that also increases costs, already, with labour shortages. Finally, UK trade policy—which always puts the interests of farmers first, but it is a shame that those are farmers in other countries—is weakening our food production domestically.

The SNP's position is clear. It is a discussion for another day, but we have a clear agenda that we want to achieve: we want to get back into the European Union, the single market and the common agricultural policy. We think that would be far and away the best solution to support agriculture. In the last couple of weeks the EU has just announced a €1.5 billion support fund for farmers. The UK needs to match that urgency and priority, but other things need to be done, too.

In Scotland we have maintained pillar 1 payments and the drift of policy in England is regrettable and needs to be reversed. I would like to see pillar 1 payments retained and reintroduced as policy, or, if not as policy, as an emergency measure to get farmers through the crisis. We need to reduce red diesel duty to zero and address energy costs via a price cap on input, and we urgently need to review immigration policy to ensure labour supply. I urge the Government to consider loan guarantees along the lines of the covid support for agricultural businesses that face a short-term—hopefully—crisis in their cash flow. We need to prioritise agriculture in future trade deals, and anything that undermines indigenous food production must be viewed

with scepticism. We need to see proper scrutiny of supermarkets and the role of multiples in the supply chain.

My heart goes out to the people of Ukraine. Our interdependence and international solidarity have come into sharp relief lately, but so has our lack of resilience. That lack of resilience and the social consequences of rising food costs are affecting every community that we all represent. If the Icelandic volcano in 2010 was a wake-up call, the events in Ukraine show that our resilience must be prioritised more, and food production must be at the heart of that resilience. There is lots that we can do, and I will work with anybody to help promote that agenda.

3.51 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) on securing the debate.

I have spent the last six minutes pondering whether to respond to the bait laid by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), and I thought, "Why not?" So, just very quickly, it was very interesting that his underlying intention is to remove agricultural subsidies, which is what I have always suspected the Tories wanted.

Greg Smith: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kerry McCarthy: It was quite clear that the hon. Gentleman said that he ultimately wanted to see a situation where we would not subsidise farming.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I did not say that there was a need to remove agricultural subsidy. I clearly said that agricultural subsidy was absolutely essential right now, but we must surely get to an end point where all agriculture is profitable.

Kerry McCarthy: Exactly. The hon. Gentleman said that the end point he wanted to get to was the removal of subsidies and to leave everything to market forces. We know there is a need for subsidies—about 60% of farmers' incomes depend on subsidies. His end point is so far into the future that to have it as an underlying policy objective is not a great idea. I do not agree with him on trade, but I will come to that later. I do not agree with him that the sugar tax or action on obesity would have the impact that he suggests, because we know from the soft drinks levy that what it has led to is the reformulation of products and people choosing to buy other products. If it works, people will not pay more because they will change their diets accordingly.

On game meat, a study that has just been released from Cambridge University showed that 99.5% of pheasants killed contained lead shot. I hope the Government will look at that figure with a view to banning lead shot. I certainly would not want to see that being served in our hospitals. However, all that has taken up more time than I had hoped, but I can never resist.

The impact of the rise in the cost of living and the absolutely desperate situation in which many people find themselves is a really important debate to be had, but I want to talk about food sovereignty and what we grow in this country. According to the national food strategy, we are about 77% self-sufficient in food that we can grow in this country—64% self-sufficient overall.

[Kerry McCarthy]

Importing more food, changing diets and eating more exotic foods is not necessarily a bad thing. I remember when spaghetti was considered exotic in the 1970s. It is good that we have far more varied diets and that we can buy fruit and veg out of season, but there is a point at which declining food sovereignty starts to have a significant impact on food security and our vulnerability to global food shocks is exposed. We have heard about Ukraine and Brexit, and we all remember the empty shelves and rotting food caused by trucks getting stuck at borders earlier this year. There is also the ever-present threat of climate change and the impact that it could have on future harvests.

A national food strategy recommendation is that we should have reports to Parliament on food security every year rather than every three years, as specified by the Agriculture Act 2020. Given the vulnerabilities that we have spoken about, it is really important that we do that so that there can be a quicker response. I would also be interested to know whether there is a target to increase food sovereignty in this country and for us to grow more, as several Members have said. That should absolutely be a goal of our policy. Instead, what we seem to have underpinning the policy is an almost desperate touting of ourselves around the world as we try to secure trade deals, which would have the impact of not just lowering food standards in this country but undermining our farmers and, in some cases, putting them out of business—particularly if the hon. Member for Buckingham has his way—further down the line.

Anthony Mangnall: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kerry McCarthy: If I get an extra minute for doing so.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid the hon. Lady does not get an extra minute, but it is her decision whether she wishes to give way.

Kerry McCarthy: In that case, I will not give way.

When I look at the trends in the global food system, my view is that it is broken. It has become incredibly reliant on huge agribusinesses that engage in heavily intensive practices that are massively destructive to the environment. There have recently been reports that the global food giant Cargill has refused to pull out of Russia, and it has repeatedly been linked to deforestation in the Amazon. JBS is another huge agribusiness that is complicit in rampant deforestation and modern slavery on Brazilian ranches. We should not be dependent on global food corporations that churn out poor-quality, mass-produced food that is bad for human health, global security and the planet.

Obviously, one of the solutions is to grow more at home. I was very pleased that the Minister met me the week before last to talk about peri-urban farming. Ideally, the Government will meet their pledge to put more money into county farms, which was made some years ago. I am slightly worried that it has dropped off the agenda, but I am pleased that the Minister is taking up some of the points that we make. The shorter supply chains are, the better, so that we can grow food closer to home and cut out food miles as well. We need to support agroecology, and we also need to tackle food waste, as I have said many times.

The final point I want to make is about supporting some of the sectors that do not get talked about. There is a big focus on red meat and dairy in this country. When I went to meet representatives of Pulses UK, it was the first time they had met a politician for such a long time. We can grow so many pulses and legumes in this country, and we can also use them to make more innovative products. One of the things that that side of the industry is crying out for is support on research and development, so that it can develop value-added products. In the industrial strategy, food barely gets a mention. If the Minister could take one thing away, I would urge her to look at how we can support farmers to grow more here, to sell more here and to flourish.

3.58 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who has long had an interest in this issue, as has my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith).

There has been a consensus—a rare thing indeed—that the UK's food security is fragile and that the resilience is not what it needs to be. The UK is not self-sufficient in food production; it imports 48% of the total food consumed, and the proportion is rising. Therefore, as a food-trading nation, we rely on both imports and a thriving agricultural sector to feed ourselves and drive economic growth. The fragility of our food security has been shown by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has also heightened fears of a global food shortage, as the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and others have said. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith reminded us, the UN World Food Programme executive has warned of an incoming hell on earth.

With maize and wheat prices rising in March—soaring by 43% and 82% respectively—and with more rises likely, UK consumers face food price rises of 15%, given that Russia has more agricultural land than all other European countries. That is combined with the fact that Ukraine has the most arable land in Europe, with 25% of the world's black soil, which is particularly fertile and has helped Ukraine to earn its place as a global agricultural powerhouse. Between them, Ukraine and Russia account for a significant proportion of global crop production, and an even bigger share of global crop exports, as we have heard in some detail this afternoon.

Given the situation in Ukraine, supply chains have been severely disrupted, which has exposed the UK's food insecurity. Every Member who has spoken today has highlighted that. Farmers across the UK are deeply concerned about surging fertiliser costs, and have been since last year. Now, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the situation has worsened further, as prices have increased by almost 50%, from £650 to £1,000 a tonne. That could lead farmers to use less fertiliser and that, in turn, will affect production, which is the last thing anyone wants when imports are threatened.

It is vital that the UK Government step in now to mitigate food insecurity. Brexit means UK farmers will miss out on access to a proposed €1.5 billion emergency fund to counter food insecurity, so we need an equivalent and proportionate UK fund that can be accessed by devolved Governments to be established at speed, to

support our farmers and help tackle the food insecurity we have heard so much about today. That could and should have been done by the Chancellor in his statement last week, but sadly it was not.

The EU has pledged to work to improve self-sufficiency of EU food supplies, and we need the same pledge backed by concrete action from the UK Government. We need to end the policy of increasing reliance on imports while at the same time bringing in Brexit checks on food imported from the EU from July this year, even as industry warns that that could further disrupt the flow of food imported into the UK. I am sure the Minister can see that creating disruption to food imports at the very time when global food insecurity is a real threat is both dangerous and self-sabotaging. At the very least, implementing import controls must be delayed until food security can be guaranteed.

Rising costs across the board are weakening food production, even before we factor in the impact of Brexit on food production, as articulated by my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling. There is no disguising the fact that there is genuine alarm and concern that the UK Government have failed to suitably respond to the imminent global food security crisis, and that has to change. That is what I believe all Members who have spoken today want to see. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling pointed out, this matter is not new but has grown ever more urgent and is now an emergency. The Government must reset the priority of domestic food production, because anything else exposes the UK to continued and increasing risk of food insecurity, as was well articulated by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith.

Food insecurity is a global concern. Ukraine is a rich and fertile land, but with the current war in that nation it is estimated that 30% of the population is in need of lifesaving food assistance. Given that Ukraine was the single biggest supplier of food to the World Food Programme, the war also means the crisis is adding to that programme's food procurement challenges, as it seeks to deliver rations to the people of Yemen, Chad and Niger, but is now also feeding 3 million hungry people in or around Ukraine, as my hon. Friend explained. In that terrible context, the issue of food waste, which was also raised by my hon. Friend and many other hon. Members who spoke today, must be tackled with renewed vigour. I hope we hear more about that from the Minister when she gets to her feet.

Food shortages from Ukraine will exacerbate existing food crises across the world. As the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, this is a world that must also be mindful of the ever-present impact of climate change on food production. G7 leaders have promised to address this global issue but there is no detail on that as yet, despite the fact that this matter is urgent and critical. This Government need to act urgently to protect UK food security and internationally we need urgent action as well on the global food crisis. Astonishingly, it is in that context that the UK Government have cut their international aid budget. That cut needs to be reversed, and the importance of doing so grows more urgent by the day.

I look forward to the Minister setting out the Government's vision as to what they will do, domestically and internationally, to address this urgent and growing crisis, and what concrete action we can expect DEFRA to take on this most important and pressing of issues.

All the participants in this debate have given the Minister much food for thought. Ultimately, our food security is inextricably linked to our national security, and the Government's policies must reflect that fact.

4.5 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the chair, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) on securing this debate.

Food security is a crucial component of national security, but it has received far too little attention from this Government. As Minette Batters, the president of the NFU, rightly said this week, food security should be a national priority, yet here we are on a Thursday afternoon at the end of the Session in a sparse Westminster Hall, as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said with such passion. This is par for the course when it comes to food security issues. A lengthy and interesting food security report—I see the Minister has a copy—was sneaked out by the Government on the last day possible before Christmas, with no opportunity for proper scrutiny, and now there have been months of delays in the Government's response to the national food strategy.

In the meantime, as we all know, the cost of the family food shop is rising week in, week out. The Library's excellent briefing quotes the Trussell Trust's latest survey, which found that 17% of people receiving universal credit had to visit a food bank between December 2021 and March 2022. That is extraordinary, because it could mean half a million people visiting a food bank. That report also found that 2 million people went without food on more than one day in the month, which is absolutely shocking. Of course, we have also heard recently about people rejecting food that needs to be cooked because they cannot afford the fuel. I could go on; we are familiar with these issues, and the Minister will probably say that they are welfare issues, not food issues. Yes, the Government's welfare policies are a disgrace and should be a cause of profound shame in this country, but the impact on food security at a household level is all too clear. It is a real and pressing issue for millions of people in our country.

Moving on to some of the wider issues, we all know about the disruptive effects on production and trade caused by the dreadful events in Ukraine, but they were hardly unforeseen. While tensions were mounting between Ukraine and Russia in the autumn of last year and analysts were warning about what could come, the Government's food security report, citing Ukraine as a country with a high market share of global maize supply, said that it did not expect any major changes in world agricultural commodity markets and the top exporting countries of those commodities. Let me put it more precisely: early in December, the US released intelligence of Russian invasion plans, but later in the same month, that report said:

“Real wheat prices are expected to decline in the coming years based on large supplies being produced in the Black Sea region”. Frankly, that is incredible. Were the Government simply unaware of the potential of the situation to impact our food supply and global wheat prices, or were they just ignoring it? What is the point of a report that is supposed to guide policy choices on food security when the most basic, blatant risks are glossed over?

[Daniel Zeichner]

It is not as if we have not been through these crises before. A similar situation arose at the start of the pandemic, and it is worth going back and reading Henry Dimbleby's interim report, which talks about that period in its opening pages. To their credit, at that point, the Government did take action. They kept the show on the road, they got unusual levels of co-operation across the food chain, and they kept shadow politicians in the loop. I commend them for that. It was a united national effort, but since those early days, that sense of purpose has fallen away. That is to be regretted, because the situation has become very difficult again, with the carbon dioxide crisis before Christmas—which I will come back to—being one such example.

I welcome the Secretary of State's decision to reconvene the food resilience industry forum, but it should have been done sooner. In the past month, I have spoken endlessly to representatives across the supply chain who report what seems to them to be a real lack of urgency from the Government, with limited dialogue and communication. On hearing that, I asked the Government why they had yet to reconvene that forum—other countries had already done so, with Ireland's Agriculture Minister establishing a food security committee three weeks ago in response to the invasion. I got a written answer in which the Government told me they could stand up a food resilience industry forum

“at short notice should the need arise.”

Should the need arise! It arose weeks ago. At last it has happened, and I welcome that, but always slow and always behind the curve.

I also urge the Minister to look at the Food and Drink Federation's call for a national food security council to ensure this is not just seen as a DEFRA issue, but that there is proper cross-Government co-ordination and a streamlined process for approving substitute ingredients. The supply chain is fragile, and the Government have to help producers and manufacturers adjust. While they may not like it, that will mean working with our near neighbours in the EU, because if they change the rules ahead of the UK, the market moves and our producers risk being disadvantaged.

While we are less directly exposed than other countries on some levels, we cannot be complacent because some of these concerns are international. There is no doubt that many countries that rely heavily on grain from Ukraine will be at serious risk. We know that rising prices lead to hunger and political volatility and that will affect us all, albeit indirectly. It is not just a short-term problem either. The invasion is impacting Ukrainian farmers' ability to sow and prepare for next year's harvest. Regardless of direct impacts, the stress on the global system will add a further inflationary pressure to food prices. Of course, it is not just grain; it is fertiliser, fuel costs and labour shortages, which will all have an impact on our producers.

The issue affects everybody. This week's *Fishing News* details the impact fleet-by-fleet, with Seafish concluding that the majority of the fleet cannot remain viable as things stand. I understand that Barrie Deas of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations has requested an urgent meeting with the Minister. I hope she can confirm today that that meeting will be granted—

hopefully much more quickly than the frankly insulting delays we are encountering with her colleagues at the Department for Transport over vessel inspections.

Luke Pollard: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that Seafish has gotten rid of its “Love Seafood” campaign that promotes British fish—fish caught in Britain, to be eaten in Britain? Does he agree that the scrapping of that scheme seems like a backwards step?

Daniel Zeichner: I always agree with my hon. Friend, but he makes an important point. It is not just fishers, of course; farmers, growers and everyone are still relating that there are those additional costs.

I want to talk briefly about fertilisers because they are directly linked to our food security. We may be able to farm differently, and there is an important opportunity here, which I hope we can explore another day. Our ambition should be, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) has argued, to make a sprint for a greener future. Labour's £28 billion per annum pledge will play an important role. In the short term, the fertiliser shortages are acute, and we know that as the gas prices rise, that creates particular problems. The Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit estimated that if current prices continue, the cost of extra fertiliser for British farmers will be £760 million, and the NFU is in no doubt that it will affect yields.

I appreciate that announcements were made yesterday, including the establishment of an industry fertiliser roundtable, which is welcome, but it must be accompanied by action. That includes the two fertiliser plants, which need to be back in action, and I ask the Minister to report on what is being done on that. The Minister will be aware that the European Commission has moved to allow direct intervention to get the Romanian plant going. What are the UK Government doing? While clarifications on the farming rules for water are broadly welcome, it is sorting out a mess of the Government's own making.

In conclusion, Labour is committed to fixing the food system, ending the growing food bank scandal, ensuring families can access healthy food and improving our food security as a country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, we want to see more food grown in this country to a good quality, not the dumping of lower standard food imports, which will undermine our farmers. We want to buy, make and sell more in Britain, and make changes to public procurement so that our schools and hospitals are stocked with more locally sourced, healthy food. We would lead by example by putting high-quality food at the heart of our public buying.

At an animal welfare event yesterday—a Conservative-branded event—I was reminded that McDonald's has higher animal welfare standards in its supply chains than the Government demand in the public sphere. It is a sobering thought, and I am afraid that it speaks volumes about the Government's record. This country could do better. We can have a more resilient food system that feeds our people better and sustains, nourishes and protects our environment. For that to happen, it needs a Government committed to making food security a national priority. At the moment, I am afraid that there is precious little sign of that.

4.14 pm

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to attend this important debate. There are familiar faces in the Chamber and, as always, it is good to see them. Some important points have been made from across the House. I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), as others have, for securing the debate. It is important that the debate is part of a wider, general and national conversation about food and food security—hon. Members know that nothing is more important to me or the Department. If I do not answer every point—it has been a very wide-ranging debate—Members should get in touch with me, or come and chat, at any point. The issues raised today are difficult and significant, and often there are no simple answers.

I know that many of us felt that war in Ukraine was coming, but I do not think many of us were prepared for the actuality or the severity of what is happening on the ground in Ukraine today. The last month has been truly horrific to witness, and we can only say how very sorry we are and how much the Ukrainian people are in our thoughts. The Government have sent £220 million of humanitarian aid, but we should all be aware that getting that aid to the people in those cellars in Mariupol is not automatic; it is very dangerous and difficult. We must continue to work globally with other nations to facilitate that where we can.

I agree with the points that many Members have made about the situation with planting in Ukraine. I was fortunate to meet the Ukrainian ambassador a week ago, and he spoke to me and the Secretary of State about direct interventions to help with the planting season this year, and we are doing our best to facilitate that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) said, the planting season starts in the next couple of weeks. The Ukrainians are a very brave people and they deserve our support.

It is also right that we lean into the difficulties that the war in Ukraine will cause for global food supply. In some of the countries that have been mentioned there will be real shortages of food as a result of the war, given those countries' reliance on imports from Ukraine. That is a significant concern for the Government. I assure Members across the House that we will very much play our part in the global response to those issues.

Neil Parish: I know the Minister is passionate about getting enough food supplies. Are the Government really looking at the amount of food we produce? We are now not only feeding ourselves but feeding the world. We cannot feed the whole world, but if we do not import so much food then there is more food for others who can ill afford to get it. Where are the fertiliser plants that the Opposition have asked for? I questioned the Prime Minister yesterday, and said that we should open them. If we get ammonium nitrate out there, we can produce more vegetables, beef, sheep, dairy and cereal. It has to be ammonium nitrate, because that is the only quick fix to get us where we need to be.

Victoria Prentis: I will come to fertilisers in a moment. I hope that my hon. Friend has a useful and productive recess planting his crops—I am sure he will. Food is

what farmers produce; it is our job. I should have drawn attention to my own farming interests at the beginning of this speech. It is right that we continue to support farmers—be in no doubt about that. The Government have committed to support farmers in the Budget year on year. I think that is very important.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton knows, it is my view that food is uppermost in what farmers think about and do. The Government have two other goals—what the EU used to call pillars—bedded into our future farming policies: nature recovery, which I think the whole House agrees is important; and carbon capture. Several hon. Members have referenced that we are going to have to adapt to climate change. Those three factors are bedded into our future farming policies, which are very much about supporting farmers to produce efficiently and productively, and to make the food that we need.

Having said all that, we need to be careful about our tone. There are going to be real problems elsewhere in the world with food supply this year; we are very fortunate in this country in that our import dependency on that area in eastern Europe is low and that we have strong domestic production of food such as wheat, maize and rapeseed. Other nations depend much more heavily on Ukraine and the area around it for those products than we do. We have to be quite careful in the way we have this discussion. What the war does directly contribute to in this country is rising costs, notably energy costs, and wider supply chain disruption. We should not gloss over those facts.

We know that the wider disruption is having a real impact on the supply and the cost of feed and fertiliser. I was very glad to chair our first meeting this morning of the fertiliser group—it was a useful meeting, in which we focused very much on practical solutions. We agreed—my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton will be glad to know—that we do need to use fertiliser to produce our crop and we need to make sure that there is enough fertiliser for all sorts of farmers, including livestock farmers, who need to produce the forage crops for next winter and in order to bump the wheat up to milling wheat status. We agreed that we did have confidence in our supply and we will be putting out a statement later today agreed by those at the group this morning—the real experts in this field—that we have sufficient supply and, while there is a cost implication, farmers should not be frightened to buy or to use fertiliser this year.

I would never refer to my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton in the terms the Prime Minister used yesterday, as an “old muckspreader”—I believe he is quite happy to be referred to as a muckspreader, but not an old one. I thank him and my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) for their remarks on the changes on urea in the farming rules for water statutory guidance, which I think are sensible and welcome, and on the supercharging of our efforts on new supplies of biofertilisers rather than chemical fertilisers. That is all welcome; none of it is a complete solution, and we should not pretend for one minute that it is, but it is all good work that needs to be done and I am glad that that is recognised.

On the role of supermarkets, in the last week or so I have met all the major supermarkets to understand the issues they face and to discuss with them what they can do to pass production costs to the primary producers.

[Victoria Prentis]

On food poverty, we learned during the pandemic—we saw once again—that targeted interventions are the way forward here. From April, the Government are providing an additional £500 million to help households with the costs of essentials. That brings the total funding for that support to £1 billion, which is very welcome. Although only half of food insecurity is in households with children, it is worth referencing the £220 million in our holiday activities and food programme, which goes directly to children.

Neil Parish: I know the Secretary of State has met with FareShare to discuss further funding. I hope that has been successful.

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend has discussed that many times with me and the Secretary of State. On food waste, in which WRAP and FareShare have played such a big part, I would like to recommit to the spending that DEFRA has given in the past. We have spent about £3 million on that work and it is really important.

I think we all agree that food poverty needs to be addressed. Where we differ is how we support farmers to do that. The Government are committed to phasing out area-based payments, whereby 50% of the payment has gone to 10% of farmers in the past, and the bottom 20% of claimants get 2% of the total budget.

I listened to what the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said about pulse farmers. I agree that pulses, pigs, horticulture and poultry have all done badly out of subsidy regimes in the past, and we are keen to put that right. It has never been more critical that we stick with the agricultural transition, because we need to incentivise efficient and productive farming. The new schemes are all about that as well as embedding nature and climate change in the way we incentivise farmers. Food is at the very heart of what we do, and food security is of course a critical national priority. I thank all those who have taken part in this important debate.

4.26 pm

Deidre Brock: I would say this, but I think that was one of the best debates I have ever listened to. It was considered, intelligent and informed. Although I did

not necessarily agree with everything that was said, broadly there is a consensus across this place that food security is an incredibly important issue that deserves to be more widely talked about in this place and across the UK.

I congratulate all those who took part in the debate—familiar faces or not. All the contributions were excellent and raised a lot of important points that I hope the Minister will take note of and take to heart when she undertakes further discussions on the subject and makes interventions. From more at-home production to fewer faceless and nameless suppliers, from setting targets for minimum domestic food production and food sovereignty to seeking a balance between rewilding projects and food production, and from the responsibilities that supermarkets must take on to the diversification of food production and the effects on our fishing communities, it really has been a very wide-ranging debate, as the Minister said.

I hear what the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said about familiar faces at these debates, although I commend all Members for being here. It is the last day before recess, and I was actually very pleased at the turnout and thank everyone for coming along. However, I feel that the debate has barely scratched the surface. There is a lot more to be said about this issue, and many more people in this place need to be involved in this discussion and to become more aware of it.

I hope it is appropriate to say that I will be seeking to secure another debate on this issue with the Backbench Business Committee, and hopefully we can get it into the main Chamber so that we can open it up for further discussion—hopefully before the Secretary of State comes to talk to us about food security, and perhaps later in the autumn. I thank Members again for coming along today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered food security.

4.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 31 March 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

North Sea Transition Authority

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): As the House is aware, the North sea transition deal was agreed with the oil and gas industry a year ago. This is a central part of the energy transition and a global exemplar of how an oil and gas producer can plan for a smooth transition away from our reliance on fossil fuels. The urgency of this transition along with the ongoing need for oil and gas has been highlighted by Putin's war against Ukraine.

The role of the oil and gas authority has developed over the past few years, and its name reflected only one part of the work that it does. It has now changed its name to the North Sea Transition Authority. The Government were consulted and supports this change.

The new name better represents the breadth of work it now undertakes and its pivotal role in supporting the UK upstream oil and gas industry to achieve net zero emissions.

Oil and gas currently meet around 75% of the UK's energy demand and they will continue to play a vital part in the energy mix for decades to come as we head to net zero. Oil and gas will have a key role to play in our transition to net zero, and sourcing gas domestically can have significant environmental benefits compared to importing it from abroad. The North Sea Transition Authority is helping the industry reduce its own emissions and is now considerably more active in supporting the broader energy transition.

Recent geopolitical events have also made it clearer than ever that security of supply remains of vital importance as the transition is achieved, and the North Sea Transition Authority will remain resolutely focused on its role in ensuring energy security as the body which stewards the oil and gas industry, both on and offshore.

The new name of the North Sea Transition Authority reflects the changing world and its changing role, but also the importance of our North sea to the UK's energy future. The sector is also an important part of our economy, supporting around 118,000 jobs across the UK, and paying over £30 billion in tax since 2010.

I plan to return to update the House on progress in implementing the North sea transition deal in due course.

[HCWS766]

Bulb Energy Limited: Letter of Credit for Energy Administrators

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): Today I will lay before Parliament a departmental minute describing a contingent liability arising from the issuance of a letter of credit for the energy administrators acting in the special administration

regime for Bulb Energy Limited (Bulb). This letter of credit replaces a previous one originally provided in December, with an extension announced within a written ministerial statement on 2 March, which has now expired.

It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability of £300,000 and above, for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present Parliament with a minute giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances.

I regret that, due to negotiations with the counterparty only just concluding, I have not been able to follow the usual notification timelines to allow consideration of these issues in advance of issuing the letter of credit.

Bulb entered the energy supply company special administration regime on 24 November 2021. Energy administrators were appointed by court to achieve the statutory objective of continuing energy supplies at the lowest reasonable practicable cost until such time as it becomes unnecessary for the special administration to remain in force for that purpose.

My Department has agreed to provide a facility to the energy administrators, with a letter of credit issued, with my approval, to guarantee such contract, code, licence, or other document obligations of the company consistent with the special administration's statutory objective. I will update the House if any letters of credit are drawn against.

The legal basis for a letter of credit is section 165 of the Energy Act 2004, as applied and modified by section 96 of the Energy Act 2011.

HM Treasury has approved the arrangements in principle.

[HCWS746]

Performance Targets for the Intellectual Property Office

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): Our innovation strategy sets out our ambitions for an innovation-led economy. Now, more than ever, we must support innovators as the UK looks to embrace the science and innovation that is at the heart of our post-pandemic economic plan to build back better.

For a company and as a country, having your IP secure makes life more enjoyable, easier, safer, and prosperous, giving researchers, inventors, creators, businesses and organisations the confidence to invest their time, energy and money in doing something new.

This confidence is essential. It incentivises innovation which drives economic growth and improvements in society.

The UK is fortunate to start from an enviable position. We are already renowned for our leadership in research and our excellent scientific institutions that generate life-changing technological advances. We are home to many innovative businesses, from established global players to burgeoning start-ups. Our research and development (R&D) roadmap has committed to unprecedented levels of public investment (a 30% increase) in R&D. And our creative industries are known around the world for their excellence in fields as diverse as music, cinema, literature and computer games.

Innovation drives economic growth and creates jobs. However, too few businesses are aware of and able to access the tools they need to translate new ideas into new products and services and to challenge established businesses. We are committed to making the UK the best ecosystem in the world for starting and growing a business. That means having the best access to capital, skills and ideas, as well as a smart and stable regulatory framework.

The Intellectual Property Office (IPO) corporate priorities 2022-23 will, through its stewardship of the IP system, play a fundamental role in ensuring the UK becomes the most innovative and creative country in the world. The IPO is an ambitious, growing organisation that aims to be the best IP office in the world. The IPO team has a clear plan to deliver its corporate priorities and provide excellent services internally and externally, shaping our UK IP environment and making the IPO a first-class place to work.

As an Executive agency and trading fund of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the IPO has set targets which are agreed by Ministers and laid before Parliament. I am glad that today I can inform the House that for 2022-23 the IPO's strategic targets are:

By the end of March 2023, the service design, business processes and technical requirements for all six transformation projects (manage, secure, challenge, registers, search and IP journals) will be fully defined and documented.

Achieve an average overall customer satisfaction of 85% or more.

Produce a strategic threat and harm intelligence assessment of intellectual property rights infringement (by November 2022).

To achieve efficiencies worth at least 3.5% of our core operating costs.

IPO will work with BEIS and other partner organisations to review its priorities regularly, ensuring they support wider Government aims and that its efforts and resources are focused where they will have the most significant impact driving UK innovation and a creative economy.

[HCWS745]

CABINET OFFICE

Pay Remit Guidance 2022-23

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Today we publish this year's civil service pay remit guidance. This document provides a framework for setting pay for civil servants throughout the civil service, including Departments, non-ministerial Departments and agencies, as well as for public sector workers in non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) and other arm's length bodies for the 2022-23 pay remit year.

This Government want to ensure that they are attracting the best and brightest to work for the civil service, and rewarding hard working staff fairly. Civil servants benefit from a competitive employment offer including access to one of the best pension schemes available amongst other benefits. In addition to this, our ambition is for the civil service to be the most inclusive employer in the

country, offering opportunities and a chance to progress in challenging roles, delivering vital public services across the country.

With economic recovery under way, this year's pay guidance is framed by the commitment of this Government to deliver on their extensive agenda that will require reform of the capacity and capability of the civil service. We need to ensure that the civil service is equipped with the right skills and values, and that the policymakers are closer to the communities they serve. However, we must also balance pay settlements with our macroeconomic objectives and the need to invest in high quality public services. This remit guidance ensures broad parity with private sector wage settlements while providing fair pay rises for hard working staff.

This year's guidance sets out that civil service organisations are able to make pay awards of up to 3%. They will have freedom to pay average awards up to 2%, with a further 1% to be targeted at specific priorities in their workforce and pay strategies. In addition, organisations are able to fund legal requirements of increases to the national living wage (NLW) by 6.6% to £9.50 per hour from April 2022. As the Chancellor stated, this will ensure that we are making work pay and keeps us on track to meet our target to end low pay by the end of this Parliament.

[HCWS756]

TREASURY

Oil and Gas Decommissioning Relief Deeds

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Helen Whately):

At Budget 2013, the Government announced it would begin signing decommissioning relief deeds. These deeds represented a new contractual approach to provide oil and gas companies with certainty on the level of tax relief they will receive on future decommissioning costs.

Since October 2013, the Government have entered into 101 decommissioning relief deeds.

Offshore Energies UK estimates that these deeds have so far unlocked approximately £8.3 billion of capital, which can now be invested elsewhere.

The Government committed to report to Parliament every year on progress with the decommissioning relief deeds. The report for financial year 2020-21 is provided below.

Number of decommissioning relief agreements entered into: the Government entered into 2 decommissioning relief agreements in 2020-21.

Total number of decommissioning relief agreements in force at the end of that year: 98 decommissioning relief agreements were in force at the end of the year.

Number of payments made under any decommissioning relief agreements during that year, and the amount of each payment: two payments were made under a decommissioning relief agreement in 2020-21, for £49 million in total. These were made in relation to the provision recognised by HM Treasury in 2015, as a result of a company defaulting on its decommissioning obligations.

Total number of payments that have been made under any decommissioning relief agreements as at the end of that year, and the total amount of those payments: eight payments have been made under any decommissioning relief agreement as at the end of the 2020-21 financial year, totalling £197.6 million.

Estimate of the maximum amount liable to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements: the Government has not made any changes to the tax regime that would generate a liability to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements. HM Treasury's 2021-22 accounts will recognise a provision of £167.1 million in respect of decommissioning expenditure incurred as a result of a company defaulting on their decommissioning obligations¹. The majority of this is expected to be realised over the next two years.

¹This figure takes into account payments made subsequent to the financial year covered by this written ministerial statement.

[HCWS761]

Homes for Ukraine Scheme: Tax Exemptions for Sponsorship Payments

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):

The Government have already announced that sponsorship payments under the Homes for Ukraine scheme will be tax-free and are today setting out more information on how we will legislate to ensure this is the case.

The Government intend to legislate within Finance Bill 2022-23 to ensure that the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship payment, made by Local Authorities to sponsors under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, will be exempt from income tax and corporation tax. The legislation will be retrospective with effect from the date the first payments to sponsors will be made. The payment will not be chargeable to national insurance contributions.

The Government have also introduced legislation to disregard payments made under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme when calculating income for the purposes of tax credits.

HM Revenue and Customs will not collect any tax that may have been due on payments made from the date the first payments to sponsors will be made to the date the legislation takes overriding effect.

As the payments will be treated as non-taxable income, any expenses that could otherwise have been offset against taxable income will not be allowable as a tax deduction (e.g. expenses incurred by landlords in relation to the property).

Application of the annual tax on enveloped dwellings and 15% rate of stamp duty land tax for sponsors under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme

The Government intend to legislate within Finance Bill 2022-23 so that those companies that currently qualify for the existing reliefs available from the annual tax on enveloped dwellings (ATED) and the 15% rate of stamp duty land tax (SDLT) for dwellings used in a property development or property trading business or let on a commercial basis will continue to be able to claim the relief while the dwellings are being used under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme.

Where a company purchases a property for a purpose that would otherwise be relievable from the 15% rate of SDLT, relief will continue to be available if the property is to be temporarily used under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme.

Where a dwelling does not currently qualify for relief from ATED, before the property is included in the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, ATED relief will be available from the point of occupation where the entire dwelling is used under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme.

The legislation will have effect from 1 April 2022 for ATED and from the date of this statement for the 15% rate of SDLT. From those dates and to the date the legislation takes overriding effect, HM Revenue and Customs will not collect any ATED or SDLT that may have been due following a change in the use of the dwelling to be part of the Homes for Ukraine Scheme.

[HCWS760]

EDUCATION

Education Update

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker):

Following the launch of the Schools White Paper, which pledged that any child falling behind in maths or English will get the support they need to catch-up, I am today providing an update to the House on one of the Government's most significant programmes supporting pupils to recover from the effects of the pandemic. My update today addresses our work to further develop the national tutoring programme to put schools in the best possible position to develop a high-quality tutoring offer for their pupils to benefit from in the next academic year.

On 14 March, I announced that over 1 million courses had been started through the programme since its inception in November 2020. I am now pleased to advise the House that our latest estimates show that 1.2 million courses have now been started, which means that the Government remain on track to deliver the ambitious target of up to 6 million courses by 2024. Today's estimates also show that more than 887,500 courses have been started this academic year. Of these around 675,000 were provided through school-led tutoring, which we have enabled by providing funding directly to schools that wish to deliver tutoring via their own staff. From today we are starting a schedule of regular, half-termly data reporting to set out the participation of schools and pupils across all three routes from national to local authority level.

To ensure that as many pupils as possible can benefit from high-quality tutoring, we are today announcing that schools will have the flexibility to extend their tuition offer throughout the summer break. This will allow more pupils to benefit from targeted academic support and includes tuition provided via tuition partners, academic mentors and school-led tutoring. This reflects our commitment to invest in proven approaches, responding to the positive feedback from schools about the teaching provision they were able to offer in summer 2021.

In light of the success of school-led tutoring this year, we have decided that from the next academic year all national tutoring programme funding will go directly to schools. This will simplify the system and give schools the freedom to decide how best to provide tutoring for their pupils. This means that schools can still use their own staff to deliver tutoring and also continue to engage tuition partners they have worked with this year. Schools can also still employ academic mentors already on their staff. We will provide new support to schools that wish to find a tuition partner to work with them next year, and we will continue to recruit a pool of academic mentors for deployment to schools that request them.

We will share with schools their individual funding allocations in the summer term. These will be determined by each school's number of disadvantaged pupils, which will mean that tutoring will continue to be targeted at those pupils who need it most. Schools will be able to use this funding to cover 60% of the cost of tutoring delivered in AY22-23. For the following year, schools can use national tutoring programme funding to cover 25% of the cost of tutoring.

The Department for Education will launch a procurement process in April to appoint one or more delivery partners to quality assure tuition partners, recruit and deploy academic mentors and provide high-quality training to new tutors. Launching a new procurement means that we will not be taking up the option to renew the contract currently held with Randstad beyond its initial contract term, which ends on 31 August 2022. We are grateful to Randstad for their contribution.

[HCWS755]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Budget of the Office for Environmental Protection

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Secretary of State is setting out the budget for the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) for the financial year 2022-23 and an indicative budget for five years which will be protected by DEFRA within this spending review period. This will ensure the OEP has sufficient funds to carry out its statutory functions in England and gives greater certainty to the OEP over its long-term finances with which to plan its activities. The Northern Ireland contribution to the OEP's budget, reflecting the additional cost of the OEP's functions in Northern Ireland, is subject to ongoing discussion and will be confirmed in due course.

Following DEFRA's internal assurance of the budget allocation, the OEP will receive:

In 2022-23: a ring-fenced baseline budget of £7,108,583, and additional funding of £4,364,366, totalling £11,472,949

In 2023-24: a ring-fenced baseline budget of £7,250,755

In 2024-25: a ring-fenced baseline budget of £7,395,770

The indicative baseline budget for 2025-26 is £7,543,685 and for 2026-27 is £7,694,559.

The total funding of £11.47 million for the upcoming financial year includes an additional £4.36 million to support the OEP's establishment costs. The 2022-23 baseline budget of £7.11 million to cover ongoing operational costs and the exercise of the OEP's statutory functions will increase year on year allowing for inflation, forming the five-year indicative budget.

The OEP's baseline budget is ring fenced for the duration of the spending review period and the OEP will not be subject to savings. As with the use of any public funds, we expect the OEP to manage its budget with a high standard of probity, declare in-year underspends and return any unspent funds to the Department.

Should the OEP be asked to undertake additional duties which increases the cost of undertaking its functions, the Secretary of State will ensure supplementary funding is available so that the OEP's funding overall remains

sufficient. Further, should the OEP identify additional needs in 2022-23 or future years it will be able to bid for supplementary funds through a bespoke budget allocation process.

DEFRA will also conduct a review within 18 months of the OEP being set up in line with Cabinet Office guidance regarding new arm's length bodies. This will provide an early assessment of the effectiveness and long-term resource requirements of the body.

[HCWS750]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

British Council Annual Report and Accounts 2020-2021

The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling): Copies of the British Council's annual report and accounts for the 2020-21 financial year have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The British Council is a world leader in promoting Britain, fostering cultural relations and sharing our values. It boosts British arts and culture, education and the English language, working with individuals across the globe by helping transform people's lives; and it works with Governments and a variety of organisations to spread long-term benefits through societies. The British Council connects the best of the UK with the world, and the best of the world with the UK.

In 2020-21 the British Council received £149 million grant-in-aid from the FCO/FCDO. It reached a total of 745 million people, creating 67 million direct interactions though a presence in over 100 countries. Such connections, based on an understanding of each other's strengths and shared values, build an enduring trust. The British Council projects UK values around the world, bringing significant returns to the UK's security, prosperity and influence.

The annual report can also be found at the British Council's website: www.britishcouncil.org.

[HCWS747]

Contingent Liability Notification: Ukraine Guarantee

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): Today, I have laid a departmental minute which describes a liability the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) is undertaking to support the economic stability of Ukraine after the Russian invasion in March 2022.

It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances.

The FCDO will guarantee up to \$450 million or EUR-equivalent (approximately €410 million or £344 million at the current exchange rate) of financing by the World Bank to the Government of Ukraine. It will enable \$450 million of additional World Bank financing to the Government of Ukraine.

It is normal that, any contingent liabilities should not be incurred until 14 sitting days after Parliament has been notified of the Government's intention to incur a contingent liability but there is an exception in cases of special urgency, such as this.

The next World Bank loan is planned for mid-April. We want our guarantee to be ready to increase the size of this loan and ensure resources reach the people of Ukraine as quickly as possible. We cannot wait for the House to return before creating this contingent liability.

The exact length of the liability is dependent on the agreed loan by the World Bank but is expected to last up to 25 years. FCDO would only pay official development assistance if a default occurs as agreed with the World Bank. The departmental minute sets this out in detail.

HM Treasury has approved the proposal in principle and the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee has been notified.

I am placing today a copy of the departmental minute in the Library of the House.

[HCWS751]

Hong Kong Six-monthly Report

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): The latest six-monthly report on the implementation of the Sino-British joint declaration on Hong Kong was published today, and is attached. It covers the period from 1 July to 31 December 2021. The report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. A copy is also available on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office website

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-development-office>).

I commend the report to the House.

The attachment can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-03-31/HCWS765/>.

[HCWS765]

UK-EU Trade and Co-operation Agreement Domestic Advisory Group: Membership

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): The Government ran an expression of interest campaign from 19 October 2021 until 29 November 2021 to determine membership of the domestic advisory group and civil society forum, the two formal civil society engagement channels provided for in the trade and co-operation agreement (TCA).

Today, after careful analysis of applications to try to ensure a balanced, sectoral and geographical representation of civil society organisations, the Government are publishing the membership list for the UK domestic advisory group.

The members are:

ADS Group Ltd (Aerospace, Defence, Security and Space)
Agricultural Industries Confederation (AIC)
Airlines UK

Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry
Bar Council of England & Wales
British Beer and Pub Association
British Chambers of Commerce
British International Freight Association (BIFA)
British Meat Processors Association (BMPA)
British Medical Association
British Ports Association
Confederation of British Industry (CBI)
Chartered Accountants Ireland
Chemical Business Association
Citizens Advice
Dairy Council for Northern Ireland
Energy UK
Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)
Food and Drink Federation (FDF)
Greener UK
GuildHE
Law Society of England and Wales
LIVE (Live music Industry Venues & Entertainment)
Logistics UK
Make UK
National Council for Voluntary Organisations
National Farmers' Union
NHS Confederation
Road Haulage Association
Scotch Whisky Association
Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations
Scottish Fishermen's Federation
techUK
The Business Services Association (BSA)
TheCityUK
Trades Union Congress (TUC) plus four other unions represented through TUC (five seats total)
UK Music
UKFinance
United Kingdom Association of Fish Producer Organisations (UKAFPO)
Universities UK
Wales Council for Voluntary Action
Wine and Spirit Trade Association (WSTA)

The membership list will be kept under review and additional members will be considered in the future. We are preparing for the domestic advisory group to meet in April.

The Government are in discussions with the European Commission to finalise the date for the first civil society forum. The UK delegation to the civil society forum will be announced once the guidelines which underpin the forum are agreed by the TCA Partnership Council.

[HCWS752]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

PPE Stock Management

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): The Government rightly prioritised saving lives throughout this pandemic. The scale of the challenge we faced should not be underestimated. We have worked tirelessly to source lifesaving PPE, delivering more than 19.1 billion items to protect frontline health and care staff.

Global demand for PPE reached unparalleled levels at the outset of the pandemic, which resulted in huge disruption across the market for PPE.

Our fight was against a new infection and at the outset, the data to determine what PPE the health and care sectors needed did not exist. Requirement for supplies was initially forecast on reasonable worst-case scenario modelling, and we now know less PPE was needed in practice.

However, in a fast-moving world of tough choices too much was preferable to too little given this was about saving lives. We had to plan for the worst. As the orders were being placed during the height of the crisis, when the market was extremely volatile, we had to factor in the likely non-performance of contracts.

We are now in a position where we have high confidence that we have sufficient stock to cover all future covid-19 related demands, even in the face of new variants of concern such as we have seen with omicron and with cases of the BA.2 lineage rising.

Not only this, but we now have the capability to produce most of what we need here in the UK across all categories except for gloves.

Where we have surplus stock, including stock that has turned out not to be suitable for use in the NHS, we have employed a range of measures to reduce it including selling, re-using and donating both in this country and internationally, recycling, and by pursuing return or recovery of costs through the original supplier.

Where products have failed quality assurance, or if products were ordered that have not arrived, the Department is taking action to determine whether a breach of contract has occurred. The investigations into contracts where we have some degree of dissatisfaction due to our high standards of quality control, or due to clear contractual breach, relate to 176 contracts.

We are working through the dispute resolution process and we are aiming to recoup significant amounts. The Department has already reduced the supply of PPE by varying and curtailing contracts. As at 18 December, the Department had negotiated the cancellation or variation of contracts to reduce the original supply of PPE by 1.21 billion items that would have cost £572 million.

Sales

To date we have achieved the sale of 330 million masks to two private companies, and we have other deals in the pipeline.

We are also about to launch an online auction to sell PPE, so individuals and companies may bid for our excess stock. Details are available on Gov.UK.

Repurposing

There are a number of items that meet all technical requirements and are suitable for use in the NHS, but they are not the preferred option. For example, self-construct visors which take four to six minutes to build were not overly appropriate for clinical settings with high usage.

However, the items were high quality and have been used in settings which allow for less time-pressured set up, such as by dentists.

Similarly, flatpack aprons have been able to be distributed for use in social care settings.

Shelf-life extension

We are exploring shelf-life extension for items that are in demand.

The Department has appointed a third-party medical laboratory to provide testing of certain categories of PPE products to see how viable it is to extend their shelf life without the products being compromised where this fits with our overall plans.

Donations

We have donated a large number of products domestically to support this country's road to recovery underpinned by the fantastic success of our vaccination rollout. This includes 207 million masks being supplied to our schools so that pupils could get back to learning in classrooms with their peers and 38 million to transport operators to help get Britain moving once again as we begin to live with the virus. Masks have also been distributed to charities and polling stations.

Having this stock has also allowed us to provide items across the world to support the global fight against the virus.

So far, working with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, we have donated 500,000 items to Lebanon, Nepal and Overseas Territories and are in discussions with other countries and multilateral organisations, working to finalise agreements and logistics with over 30 countries. We have also donated to Ukraine, as part of a wider package of UK Government support.

Recycling

After successful trials, we have now recycled 23 million visors into plastic food trays. We are also in the process of recycling 53 thousand pallets of aprons and eye protectors; aprons are being made into bin bags, "Bags for Life" and other high-demand products.

Disposals

Our priorities are to sell, donate, repurpose or recycle wherever we can. Nevertheless, there are some PPE products that we cannot reuse or recycle. The majority of PPE items are designed to be single use and disposed of as medical waste and so are often made up of complex chains of polymers. These items cannot be broken down for recycling. As a result, many of the products we hold are not able to be fully recycled and around half are completely non-recyclable.

We have awarded contracts to two expert waste service providers. These lead waste providers will review the feasibility of recycling each item across our excess and provide detailed options.

To reduce storage costs, we must accelerate the speed of our programme, particularly for stock that is likely to become out-of-date before it is ever used and is unsuitable for recycling. For every pallet of PPE we sell, repurpose, donate and recycle, taxpayers save on average £2.75 a week for years to come.

The amount taxpayers will save from taking this decisive action would, for example, be enough to employ around 1,850 nurses for a year.

We will work with our lead waste providers to examine wider disposal options including through "energy from waste" processes. Environmental concerns will be key, and we will be taking into consideration the Government's waste hierarchy, prioritising recycling, and then energy from waste for that proportion of stock which we hold that cannot be recycled.

Our priorities are to keep selling, repurposing and donating the stock that we can but at the same time taking a realistic, pragmatic approach to managing stock and putting in place solutions that make sense economically and environmentally.

[HCWS762]

Health and Social Care: 2022-23 Mandate for NHS England

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): As we are learning to live with covid, we must now return our focus to delivering the Government's important strategic goals for health and care, including—subject to the agreement of Parliament—by taking forward the further reforms set out in the Health and Care Bill, which is nearing its final stages.

We can define our goals in terms of four key priorities. First, we must prioritise prevention, supporting people to live healthier lives with reduced risk of future health problems. This is crucial if we are to ensure that health and care services can focus resources on those who most need them. It is a central theme of the Government's command paper "Build Back Better: Our Plan for Health and Social Care" and also supports our action plan on levelling up the United Kingdom.

Secondly, we must create more personalisation—empowering people by putting them in control of their own care. Thirdly we must prioritise performance—driving up the quality of care by working smarter. And in achieving our goals, we must support our people, without whom health and care services could not provide high quality and safe care to all who need it.

I am today laying before Parliament the Government's 2022-23 mandate for NHS England. This sets out the action that the Government expect the NHS to take in the year ahead in support of these four priorities. There is a firm focus on recovering important NHS-led services that have been impacted by the pandemic. Beyond that, there will be further progress on the NHS long term plan, which will be updated in summer 2022 to ensure it remains aligned to the Government's post-pandemic priorities. It then paves the way for more resilient and integrated health and care services in future, with excellent leadership, a culture of transparency and openness, and a strong commitment to support and develop the NHS workforce. Key work remains on covid-19. High rates of infection will still need to be managed as we shift from pandemic to endemic.

The revenue and capital resource limits for NHS England in 2022-23 set out in the mandate reflect the updated NHS financial settlement and also take account of the additional support provided through the 2021 spending review to fund the biggest catch-up programme in NHS history.

Also as required by the Act, I am today laying a revised 2021-22 mandate. This revision is to update NHS England's capital and revenue resource limits for 2021-22 in light of in-year funding decisions.

[HCWS764]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Office for Police Conduct Annual Report and Accounts 2020-2021

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):

I am today, along with my the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), publishing the 2020-21 annual report and accounts for the Independent Office for Police Conduct [HC 1237]. This will be laid before the House and published on www.gov.uk. The report will also be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS757]

Grand Chamber ECtHR Judgment in Big Brother Watch and Others v. UK

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): On 25 May 2021 the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights handed down its judgment in the case of Big Brother Watch and others v. UK (BBW). The case concerned the lawfulness of the historic legal frameworks for bulk interception and targeted acquisition of communications data in the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) as well as the receipt of intelligence from international partners.

Crucially, the judgment found that bulk interception is not in itself a violation of the European convention on human rights (ECHR) and indeed noted its critical importance as a tool for identifying threats to our national security. The judgment also endorsed the arrangements for international sharing of intelligence.

There were some deficiencies identified in the function of the regime under RIPA, most of which have already been rectified with the introduction of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 (IPA), and I write today to set out how the Government plan to deal with the remaining issues.

First, the Court found that an application for a bulk interception warrant should set out the types or categories of selectors that may be liable for selection following interception to provide extra context to the decision maker approving the warrant. When the IPA came into force, it introduced a list of "operational purposes", in effect the reasons for which an agency may select data for examination once obtained under a bulk warrant. The list is provided to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament every three months and is reviewed by the Prime Minister every year.

The Government consider that these operational purposes are sufficient to satisfy the requirement imposed by the Court. Furthermore, my officials, in conjunction with those in the security and intelligence agencies, are undertaking a review of the operational purposes with this requirement in mind.

Secondly, the Court found that the use of certain "strong" selectors such as a personal email address or mobile telephone number clearly linking to an identified person, should be subject to prior internal authorisation, on top of the existing requirements to demonstrate each

is used only where strictly necessary and proportionate in relation to bulk interception and is in accordance with all other applicable safeguards.

The security and intelligence agencies use strong selectors to select data acquired under bulk interception warrants under part 6, chapter 1 of the IPA. Where those strong selectors are applied to identifiable individuals, prior internal authorisation will be required. Plans to implement this additional step are already well-developed and are soon due to be incorporated into the systems used by the analysts within the security and intelligence agencies. This will be accompanied by additional guidance and training.

Thirdly, the Court ruled that in order to be compliant with article 10 ECHR, prior judicial authorisation should be sought where targeting with strong selectors using bulk interception will lead to the targeting of journalists or the acquisition and retention of confidential journalistic material. This additional robust safeguard will provide further enhancements to the protections for journalists and sources. My officials have been working with the security and intelligence agencies and with the Investigatory Powers Commissioners Office to establish the process for prior judicial authorisation and we will be making necessary changes to primary legislation and codes of practice in due course.

[HCWS759]

Windrush Lessons Learned Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Today we are publishing the “Windrush Lessons Learned Review - Progress Update” which focuses on the work undertaken by the Home Office over the past two years in response to the initial Windrush lessons learned review. I am grateful to Wendy Williams as independent adviser and her team for returning to assess the Home Office’s progress since the publication of her original report in March 2020.

The initial Windrush review exposed unacceptable failings in the Home Office and an “institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness towards the issue of race, and the history of the Windrush generation”. I accepted Wendy Williams’ findings when the original report was published and I continue to repeat both my sincere heartfelt apology to those impacted from the Windrush generation and the wider Commonwealth and my commitment to righting the wrongs so that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

I published a comprehensive improvement plan in September 2020 which set out the actions we intended to take in response to the Windrush lessons learned review. I am pleased that, in reviewing progress, Wendy Williams concludes that we have risen to the challenge she set us. She states that there are several areas where very good progress has been made and structures have been put in place which should provide appropriate levels of oversight of the Department in the future. She has also seen excellent behaviour and initiatives from members of staff and teams.

I am confident that we have started to deliver the meaningful change that the Windrush generation and wider public expect and deserve from the Home Office. I also believe that we have already made significant progress in creating the culture shift that Wendy Williams

challenged us to bring about. I am proud of the work that we have already undertaken in response to the Windrush lessons learned review.

We have now offered £45 million through the Windrush compensation scheme, with £37.7 million paid across 993 claims. We have also provided over 14,800 individuals with documentation confirming their status or British citizenship.

Whilst commending our overall progress and commitment, Wendy Williams has identified areas where we still need to go further. She recognises the major programme of work which has taken place, and that the scale of our ambition to achieve genuine cultural change requires ongoing reflection, commitment to constant improvement and time. I welcome this progress update and we will continue to build on the progress which has been made.

It remains our mission to make the Home Office a better place to serve the public. I am grateful to my permanent secretaries and senior officials whose dedication to improving the department and making amends remains resolute. I extend my gratitude to the civil servants in the Home Office and across government who continue to rise to the challenge that the Windrush lessons learned review has set us all, and who work tirelessly every single day in challenging and demanding roles to keep the public and our country safe. Like me, they recognise that there is much work still to deliver the vision set out in our comprehensive improvement plan. I am confident that together we can achieve that.

The Progress Update will be made available on gov.uk at: Windrush Lessons Learned Review: progress update - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

[HCWS754]

Work of the Home Office

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Today I am updating Parliament on Home Office delivery since my statement of 16 December 2021. The Department is committed to delivering better outcomes for the public and will continue to work to deliver a safer, fairer and more prosperous United Kingdom.

The Home Office’s humanitarian response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and our delivery of robust economic crime measures

I am working with the Ukrainian Government and international partners to hold Putin to account and support the brave people of Ukraine.

The Government launched two humanitarian schemes to provide a safe route for Ukrainians who want to come to the UK, quickly standing up the Ukraine Family Scheme and the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. We streamlined the process to allow Ukrainians with valid passports to apply purely online and continue to work with partners to ensure that Ukrainians arriving here can access the right support.

The Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act provides greater powers to sanction oligarchs and businesses associated with the Russian Government. The Government have brought forth an additional 428 sanction designations since Royal Assent on 15 March. The legislation also introduces a new register of overseas

entities, requiring those behind foreign companies which own UK property to reveal their identities, and strengthens the unexplained wealth orders regime.

The oligarch taskforce is helping build cases against its list of oligarchs. Internationally, we are clamping down on sanctions evasion across jurisdictions through the Russian elites, proxies and oligarchs international taskforce. The National Crime Agency's Combating Kleptocracy Unit is providing operational capability to target corrupt elites as well as the professional enablers of these corrupt elites and support criminal cross-HMG sanctions delivery and enforcement.

Reducing crime

We are focused on delivering our beating crime plan, making Britain safer with less crime, fewer victims and safer streets.

As of 31 December 2021, we have recruited over 11,000 police officers, against our target of 20,000 by March 2023.

Our work on serious violence has provided services to those communities most affected. We launched round four of the safer streets fund which directs funding to projects tackling acquisitive crime, anti-social behaviour and violence against women and girls. We are making progress on our work to tackle violence against women and girls; we have published our violence against women and girls strategy, published the first ever stand-alone domestic abuse plan and launched the "Enough" communications campaign which highlights the action people can take to safely challenge violence against women and girls.

The Angiolini inquiry, set up to better understand how a serving police officer was able to abduct, rape and murder Sarah Everard and ensure that lessons for policing are identified and learned, started work in January 2022. The independent inquiry to investigate the death of Dawn Sturgess was formally established on 17 March 2022.

Reducing the risk from terrorism to the UK and UK interests overseas, securing a safe and prosperous UK

In February, the threat to the UK from terrorism was reduced to substantial from severe. Whilst positive, the security landscape remains complex, volatile and unpredictable as the attack outside Liverpool women's hospital and the killing of Sir David Amess sadly reminds us. The Home Office continues in its efforts, working with operational partners, to build improvements into the UK's counter-terrorism response.

Enabling the legitimate movement of people and goods to support economic prosperity

Since launching the points-based immigration system, we have continued to attract worldwide talent and skills whilst encouraging business to invest in British people. Latest statistics show the number of visas issued across work and study routes is now exceeding pre-pandemic levels, 677,000 in 2021.

We will in the coming period implement the plan for growth measures, including the launch of the new global business mobility routes, high potential individual route

and scale-up route, which support inward trade and investment and provide UK businesses access to a more flexible pool of highly-skilled workers.

Alongside new routes, we expanded capability for a fully digital application process in December 2021, improving our ability to re-use and re-check biometrics, allowing more people to benefit from a fully digital journey.

We have supported the care sector to boost their workforce by expanding eligibility for the health and social care visa to include health care assistants.

I announced a joint National Crime Agency and leading social media companies action plan to foster greater collaboration against crime groups that use online platforms to advertise illegal migration services; relevant illegal online content is already being removed.

Tackling illegal migration, removing those with no right to be here, and protecting the vulnerable

The Home Office is working to deliver a fair but firm system to ensure that we can better support those in genuine need of asylum, deter illegal migration, break the business model of criminal smuggling networks and remove from the UK those with no right to be here.

Last year, I launched and consulted on my new plan for immigration and introduced the Nationality and Borders Bill, which is advancing through Parliament on its path to Royal Assent.

The Bill will reset the legislative framework to meet objectives including the reduction of small boat crossings and deterring illegal entry into the UK. It incorporates tougher criminal offences for those attempting to enter the UK illegally by introducing a suite of asylum reforms and expedited processes to allow rapid removal of those with no right to be here.

We have worked with France to dismantle 21 small boat organised criminal groups and secured over 500 arrests. Our joint activity with France prevented more than 23,000 crossings in 2021. Over 4,500 crossings have already been prevented in 2022, nearly three times the number to this point in 2021.

I signed landmark agreements with Serbia and Albania to return those nationals who have no legal right to be in the UK.

Our new and bespoke Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) opened on 6 January. This is one of the most ambitious resettlement schemes in British history. The first people to be resettled under the scheme included some of the c. 15,000 people who arrived in the UK under Operation Pitting, the largest humanitarian aid operation since the second world war, which prioritised those at particular risk, including women's rights activists, prosecutors, and journalists.

Windrush

Our commitment to righting the wrongs done to the Windrush generation has not faltered. The "Windrush Lessons Learned Review—Progress Update" was published today. There is still more to do, but I am proud of our achievements and will ensure we can make the Home Office an even better place, serving the public with compassion, respect, collaboration and courage at the heart of everything it does.

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Supporting Families Annual Report

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): As required by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, section 3(1), today I have published the 2021-22 annual report of the Supporting Families programme. The report sets out how the programme has been helping our most disadvantaged families who face multiple and complex problems.

Supporting Families (previously the Troubled Families programme) helps level up key services to give families the practical support they need to stop domestic abuse and combat problems such as unemployment, persistent school absence and poor mental and physical health, with funding allocated based on deprivation and population figures. It has been at the heart of our ambition to strengthen families and improve their futures for 10 years. At last year's Budget, the Chancellor announced £200 million of additional investment to expand the programme. This is around a 40% real-terms uplift in funding by 2024-25, taking total planned investment across the next three years to £695 million.

Through its 10 years of delivery, the programme has directly helped hundreds of thousands of vulnerable families make positive changes to their lives, with many thousands more benefiting from access to early, co-ordinated whole family support. Importantly, the programme has shown what is possible when we step in early to help families and prevent problems from escalating. The programme's evaluation showed it reduced the proportion of children on the programme going into care by a third, the proportion of adults going to prison by a quarter and the proportion of young people going to prison by 38%.

Reducing the pressure on high-cost statutory services such as children's social care is a key focus for the expanded programme. Between 2022-23 and 2024-25 my Department will work closely with the Department for Education, local authorities, and their partners to deliver support to up to 300,000 more families.

"Levelling up for families: annual report of the Supporting Families programme 2021-2022" marks the 10th year of Supporting Families delivery and includes an update on the programme's performance and a summary of the latest research findings and policy developments for the programme.

Between April 2021 and January 2022, the programme has funded local authorities to achieve successful outcomes with 55,421 families. This includes 1,838 adults who were helped into sustained employment, and builds on 414,955 successful family outcomes achieved by the Troubled Families programme between April 2015 and March 2021. These families faced multiple and complex problems including a combination of crime, truancy, neglect, anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse, poor mental health, worklessness and financial exclusion. Every successful family outcome represents a family's life changed for the better—a considerable achievement for the families and the local services supporting them.

The report sets out how we are improving the programme in this next phase. We have updated the programme's funding formula to reflect current need by redistributing

funding to more deprived areas in line with our ambition to level up across the country. We are setting refreshed expectations on the outcomes to be achieved with families through a new outcomes framework and setting expectations for an effective early help system through an updated early help system guide. Local authorities use the outcomes framework to assess whether families are eligible for the programme's funding, measure if the family's situation is improving, and define what a good outcome looks like for each problem. The refresh will make sure that the programme continues to reflect the needs of families. The early help system guide outlines a national vision and descriptors for an effective and mature "early help system" to enable local authorities and their partners to deliver seamless, responsive, and co-ordinated preventive support to families. Updating the guide will ensure that local authorities delivering the programme continue to improve their early help offer and have clarity on what a high-standard system looks like.

The annual report summarises the latest research findings relating to the programme. Alongside the annual report, I have also published a new research report by the independent research organisation Kantar, which looks at effective practice and service delivery in local areas. This sets out what a sample of local areas report as the most effective approaches for delivering positive change in families' lives. I will deposit copies of both reports in the House of Commons Library.

I look forward to working alongside local authorities, their partners and other stakeholders as the programme celebrates its 10th anniversary, and seeing first-hand the continued impact it has on the lives of our most vulnerable families.

[HCWS753]

Intergovernmental Relations Annual Transparency Report

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations (Michael Gove): Earlier today, the UK Government published the first annual report of our engagement with the devolved Administrations on gov.uk. This report has been laid as a Command Paper in both Houses.

The report covers a historic year for the UK, and gives an insight into the extensive engagement between the UK Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive between 1 January and 31 December 2021. During 2021 the UK Government and the devolved Administrations collaborated on a number of areas, not least an effective response to covid-19 including the roll-out of the UK's vaccination programme, the successful delivery of COP26 in Glasgow, and further implementing city and growth deals to boost prosperity in all parts of the UK.

The report is part of the UK Government's ongoing commitment to transparency of intergovernmental relations to Parliament and the public. The UK Government will look to continue to develop its public reporting and transparency in intergovernmental relations in 2022.

[HCWS758]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Annual Households Below Average Income and Separated Families Statistics 2020-21

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Department for Work and Pensions has today published its annual statistics on incomes and living conditions covering 2020-21, the first year of the pandemic. This includes households below average income (HBAI), which includes statistics on household incomes and a range of low-income indicators for 2020-21, derived from the family resources survey. This consisted of around 10,000 households—half our usual sample size due to moving from face-to-face to telephone interviews in response to the pandemic.

Rigorous quality assurance and weighting of the statistics means we can have confidence in the headline statistics published. However, the impact of the changes to data collection during the pandemic become more evident when the statistics are disaggregated into smaller groups. To ensure these statistics maintain high levels of quality, DWP's chief statistician has taken the decision that HBAI statistics on smaller sub-groups should not be released this year. The full data, however, will be made available on the UK data archive. As a result of impacts on data quality, the Scottish Government publication "Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2015-18" will not be available this year, and statistics published by the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive will be released with significant caveats.

The HBAI statistics show that between 2019-20 and 2020-21, the proportion of people below the absolute low income line fell. Before housing costs, there was a decrease of one percentage point to 13% or 8.8 million people. After housing costs, there was a decrease of one percentage point to 17% or 11.1 million people.

Compared to 2009-10, there were 1.2 million fewer people in absolute low income, before housing costs: 200,000 fewer children, 500,000 fewer working age adults and 400,000 fewer pensioners.

Between 2019-20 and 2020-21, median incomes fell. The proportion of people below the relative low income line also fell. Before housing costs, there was a decrease of two percentage points to 16% or 10.5 million people. After housing costs, there was a decrease of two percentage points to 20% or 13.4 million people. This shows how relative poverty is affected by median income and reinforces why the Government's focus has been on absolute poverty as a better measure of real changes in living standards for the poorest in society, as well as on material deprivation.

This year, the Department has published new statistics for children and working age people that combine material deprivation with HBAI's statutory absolute low income measure. The statistics show that combined absolute low income and material deprivation among working age people fell three percentage points—reducing from 3.1 million in 2010-11 to 2.2 million in 2019-20. A decade of rising employment will clearly be a contributing factor in this trend. In 2020-21, 5%, or 700,000 children and 5%, or 1.9 million working age people were in combined absolute low income and material deprivation, lower than the numbers of children and working age people in low income alone.

Recognising the new statistics released today, the Department has also announced it will not proceed with developing new statistics using the work of the Social Metrics Commission as a starting point.

The Separated Families publication released alongside HBAI also shows the significant impact that child maintenance payments can have on reducing the number of children living in low income households. Overall, as a result of child maintenance payments from 2018-19 to 2020-21, 80,000 children were moved out of absolute low income before housing costs each year; 140,000 after housing costs.

This is the second year that the Department has collected data on food security. In 2020-21, 93% of households were classed as food secure, up from 92% in 2019-20.

The statistics published today show how the Government's covid support package of over £400 billion helped support jobs and incomes. We are now easing the current pressures people are facing with the cost of living, taking action to support families worth over £22 billion in 2022-23. This includes a £9.1 billion energy bill rebate package, worth up to £350 each for around 28 million households.

Also, from April, the Government are providing an additional £500 million to help households with the cost of essentials, on top of what we have already provided since October 2021, bringing the total funding for this support to £1 billion. In England, £421 million will be provided to extend the existing household support fund, while the devolved Administrations will receive £79 million through the Barnett formula.

With unemployment back to the low levels we saw before the pandemic and vacancies at record highs, our focus is on helping people to move into and boost incomes through work: for example, through the change to the universal credit taper rate and an increase to the work allowances which means millions of families are on average £1,000 a year better off, the rise to the national living wage from April and increasing the level at which people pay national insurance on their income, saving a typical employee over £330 in the year from July.

As we help people to keep more pounds in their pockets, these statistics highlight the unprecedented support we provided to protect livelihoods during the pandemic.

[HCWS748]

Household Support Fund Extension

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The economy is in recovery, with a record number of people on the payroll, but we recognise inflationary challenges and that people are concerned about pressures on household budgets. That is why we are extending the household support fund to provide cost of living support for households most in need. From April, the Government are providing an additional £500 million to help households with the cost of essentials. This brings the total funding for this support to £1 billion. In England, £421 million will be provided to extend the existing household support fund from 1 April to 30 September inclusive. The allocation for councils is

the same as for the previous six months. The devolved Administrations will receive £79 million through the Barnett formula.

The fund will be distributed via upper-tier local authorities. This support will continue to help those who are struggling to afford energy and water bills, food, and other essentials, to prevent the escalation of problems. We know energy bills may be of particular concern to low-income households and so local authorities are being encouraged to focus on supporting households with the cost of energy.

At least a third of the extension funding (£140 million) will be spent on pensioners on low incomes and at least another third (£140 million) will be spent on families with children. This will ensure that the most vulnerable, including those unable to work to boost their income, will continue to receive vital support to help with the costs of household essentials throughout the next six months.

This extension is just one way that we are helping families with the rising cost of living and other global inflationary pressures. The Government have recently

announced a three-part plan of support to help households with rising energy bills, worth £9.1 billion in 2022-23. This includes a £200 discount on energy bills this autumn for all domestic electricity customers in Great Britain, to be paid back automatically over the next five years. This also includes a £150 non-repayable rebate in council tax bills for all households in bands A-D in England, as well as a £144 million discretionary fund for local authorities to support households who are in need, regardless of their council tax band.

Likewise, the national living wage will increase to £9.50 an hour this April, providing an extra £1,000 pay for a full-time worker. This has risen every year since it was introduced in 2016. The cuts to the universal credit taper rate and the uplift to the work allowances will also put, on average, an extra £1,000 a year into the pockets of 1.7 million low-income families.

These initiatives, alongside the household support fund extension, will work to help those most in need over the coming months.

[HCWS749]

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 31 March 2022

EDUCATION

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Review

The following are extracts from the statement on the Special Needs and Disabilities Review on 29 March 2022.

Nadhim Zahawi: 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.

[Official Report, 29 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 713.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education:

An error has been identified in the response to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson).

The correct information should have been:

Nadhim Zahawi: That is why we are today announcing £1.4 billion—the first tranche of the £2.6 billion—and **plans** for up to 40 new **special and AP free schools**, which will see additional provision going into the system so that parents have the confidence that the provision will be there for their child.

Nadhim Zahawi: Today, we announced the first tranche of £1.4 billion out of £2.6 billion for up to 40 specialist and AP settings.

[Official Report, 29 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 717.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education:

An error has been identified in the response to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden).

The correct response should have been:

Nadhim Zahawi: Today, we announced the first tranche of £1.4 billion out of £2.6 billion for up to 40 **special and AP free schools**.

TRANSPORT

Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure

The following is an extract from the Adjournment debate on Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure on 30 March 2022.

Trudy Harrison: My hon. Friend referred to the apps that need to be downloaded. We in my Department agree that that is unacceptable, so we are mandating that a non-proprietary, non-phone payment method, such as contactless, should be available for all newly installed fast and rapid charge points and existing rapid charge points over 7.1 kW.

[Official Report, 30 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 963.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison):

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin).

The correct information should have been:

Trudy Harrison: My hon. Friend referred to the apps that need to be downloaded. We in my Department agree that that is unacceptable, so we are mandating that a non-proprietary, non-phone payment method, such as contactless, should be available for all newly installed fast and rapid charge points and existing rapid charge points over **50 kW**.

CABINET OFFICE

Sanctions

The following is an extract from the debate on Sanctions on 1 March 2022.

Michael Ellis: In the past seven years, Russian companies have raised £8 billion on UK markets.

[Official Report, 1 March 2022, Vol. 709, c. 954.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General:

An error has been identified in my opening contribution to the debate.

The correct information should have been:

Michael Ellis: In the past seven years, Russian companies have raised **\$8 billion** on UK markets.

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