

**Tuesday
19 April 2022**

**Volume 712
No. 146**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 19 April 2022

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SEVENTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 712

EIGHTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2021-2022

House of Commons

Oral Answers to Questions

Tuesday 19 April 2022

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we come to today's business, I wish to make a short statement. I have received letters from a number of hon. and right hon. Members, including the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the Leader of the Opposition, requesting that I give precedence to a matter as an issue of privilege. The matter is the Prime Minister's statements to the House regarding gatherings held at Downing Street and Whitehall during lockdown. The procedure for dealing with such a request is set out in "Erskine May" at paragraph 15.32.

I want to be clear about my role. First, as Members will appreciate, it is not for me to police the ministerial code. I have no jurisdiction over the ministerial code, even though a lot of people seem to think that I have. That is not the case. Secondly, it is not for me to determine whether or not the Prime Minister has committed a contempt. My role is to decide whether there is an arguable case to be examined.

Having considered the issue, and having taken advice from the Clerks of the House, I have decided that this is a matter that I should allow the precedence accorded to issues of privilege. Therefore, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras may table a motion for debate on Thursday. Scheduling the debate for Thursday will, I hope, give Members an opportunity to consider the motion and their response to it. The motion will appear on Thursday's Order Paper, to be taken after any urgent questions or statements—hopefully, there will not be any. I hope that this is helpful to the House.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Smoke-free 2030 Target

1. **Sir Charles Walker** (Broxbourne) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to meet its target of England being smoke-free by 2030. [906509]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): I know that my hon. Friend has long been a passionate advocate for a smoke-free England, and I read his recent Westminster Hall debate with interest. Some 64,000 deaths a year are attributed to smoking and it is one of the greatest drivers of health disparities in our country. I am personally determined that we should do everything we can to reach the Government's ambition of a smoke-free 2030. That is why, in January, I asked Javed Khan to lead an independent review into tobacco control. Once that review is complete, the Government will set out their next steps.

Sir Charles Walker: To get to a smoke-free 2030, for every 100 people smoking today we need to reduce that figure by eight, because "smoke-free" actually means 5% or less of the adult population smoking. Can I ask the Secretary of State to ruthlessly target the barriers that stop people stubbing out their last cigarette? We need to get the numbers of smokers down; otherwise, 2030 will be an ambition that is not achieved.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The smoking rate is currently 13.5%, which is the lowest on record. However, smoking remains the largest driver of health disparities in our country. The new tobacco control plan, which will be informed by the new independent review, will be looking to do exactly what my hon. Friend says.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As one of the original campaigners for a ban on smoking in public places, I fully support what has just been suggested, but can I go further and beg the Secretary of State to come up very soon with a plan so that every child, every person and every family in this country can breathe clean, fresh air away from the pollution coming from diesel vehicles and other sources?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman has long been a campaigner on this issue and I commend him for that. He is right to continue pushing. I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of the independent review because it is just that, a review fully independent of Government. However, once it is complete—I hope to publish it in May—we can set out our plans.

Health and Care Integration

2. **Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to help ensure that health and care services are well integrated. [906510]

19. **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What steps he is taking to help ensure that health and care services are well integrated. [906529]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): The past few years have shown that we are strongest when we work together. Earlier this year we published the integration White Paper, drawing on our experience of the pandemic to develop a plan that will bring together the NHS and local government to deliver jointly for local communities. We have also created integrated care partnerships, such as the programmes in mid-Nottinghamshire and Northamptonshire, through which we are already showing how we can bring together health and local social care services.

Ben Bradley: As covid regulations come to an end, I understand that the discharge fund is also set to end. This could leave local government vulnerable where there are no formal procedures locally to pass funding from the NHS to local government services and local authorities. Particularly as we seek to reduce hospital backlogs, it is vital that we get people out of hospital and into appropriate care settings. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that, where local authorities seek to tackle such backlogs, they will have access to appropriate funding?

Sajid Javid: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Of course, we are already putting in record funding for local authorities and the NHS to deal with backlogs. I believe the plan we set out earlier this month for the integration of NHS and local authority care services will make a real difference.

Andrew Lewer: I thank the Secretary of State for referring to the work in Northamptonshire to integrate health and social care. Can he assure me that the central role of local government in ensuring that health and social care services work together to make the most efficient use of local resources will continue? And will he give me a clear guarantee that adult social care will not be taken over by the NHS?

Sajid Javid: I am pleased to give my hon. Friend the assurance he seeks. The integration White Paper signals our intention to go further and faster on health and care integration, building on the work already being done by the NHS, adult social care and local government to deliver services jointly. The plan will lead to better collaboration, and we want to make sure that overall responsibility is still shared between local authorities and the NHS.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that Walsall Manor has been merged with the Royal Wolverhampton—they share a chief executive and chairman—without consultation with local people. How on earth can integration take place when Walsall Manor does not have a full-time chief executive to ensure that it happens? Will the Secretary of State please ensure that Walsall Manor gets its own chief executive?

Sajid Javid: I understand the right hon. Lady's point, but it is about what works on the ground. My understanding is that what is happening in her area is about a shared management team that shares best practice and tries to address challenges together, rather than any kind of formal merger.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Across the country, tens of thousands of people sitting in hospital are medically fit to go home but cannot do so due to a lack of social care. The Health and Care Bill should have addressed that, but it does not. Rather than making us wait for more legislation, will the Secretary of State at least concede that local health leaders, be they in clinical commissioning groups or in integrated care systems in shadow form, should be driving this locally as a matter of urgency?

Sajid Javid: That is exactly what the new integrated care systems are all about. My understanding is that the hon. Gentleman sat on the Health and Care Public Bill Committee, which made it a reality.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, Jake Berry. [*Laughter.*] Sorry, Wes Streeting.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. You have clearly had a happy Easter.

The fact is that the Government's failure to fix the social care crisis is causing huge pressures on the NHS. As of last week, more than 20,000 patients were fit to leave hospital but could not be discharged because the care was not available, which means that 22,000 patients each month are waiting more than 12 hours in A&E and that heart attack and stroke victims have to wait more than an hour for an ambulance. We are used to hearing about winter crises, but is it not the case that, after more than a decade of underinvestment in the NHS, a failure to fix social care and the absence of a plan even to address the staffing challenge in the NHS and social care, we have not just a winter crisis but a permanent crisis in the NHS?

Sajid Javid: That is not the case at all. The hon. Gentleman knows, although he pretends not to, that the NHS and social care are facing unprecedented pressure

because of the pandemic. He will know that as a result of the pandemic, both in NHS settings and in adult social care there has been a necessity for infection and protection controls. He will know that, sadly, staff absences are higher than they have been in normal times. But the NHS is stepping forward, with its colleagues in adult social care, to provide whatever support it can bring, especially with the record funding the Government are providing, both to the NHS and to adult social care.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) and I have been working with east Lancashire local authorities and our GP services to see whether we can increase the number of face-to-face GP appointments. Will the Secretary of State say what action he and the Government are taking to ensure that people in east Lancashire can see their general practitioner face to face?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. We have heard time and time again in this Chamber about the pressures our constituents are facing in order to get that kind of face-to-face access to their GPs. We all know why the situation was particularly bad at the height of the pandemic, but we expect it to improve rapidly. The percentage of people being seen face to face is increasing substantially, in large part because of the measures the Government have taken, including the £250 million access fund that was announced a few months ago.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Martyn Day.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Integration and service improvement cannot be delivered without sufficient staff, and the only way to attract people to a career in social care is by valuing them. In Scotland, they are already paid better than those in England and Wales, and through the national care service the Scottish Government will improve terms and conditions for care workers, through the introduction of national pay bargaining. Have the UK Government considered following the Scottish Government's approach and commitments?

Sajid Javid: Integration between the NHS and social care requires the right level and quality of workforce, both in the NHS and in adult social care. In the NHS in England, we have more doctors and nurses—more people working than ever before. In adult social care, we are recruiting at high levels, not least because of the huge recruitment campaign we ran with the sector, and some of the other changes we made, including the £400 million-plus of retention funding over the winter period. In addition, the support for the workforce more generally is making a real difference.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): In north Northamptonshire, integration is getting on very well, with Councillor Helen Harrison heading the adult social services. However, going back to what my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) said, there is the worry that because the NHS is so big it will overwhelm local government. I have told the Secretary

of State that they do not want to mess with Helen Harrison, but can he ensure that there is a mechanism for reviewing that?

Sajid Javid: I know that my hon. Friend knows Helen Harrison extremely well, but he is right to talk about the importance of the NHS and the adult social care sector and local authorities working together. We must make sure that it is a true partnership, where one does not overwhelm the other and they work together towards their shared interests.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): One key cause of the urgent care crisis in Shropshire, in the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust, is the inability to discharge patients who are medically fit to go home into social care in the community. Shropshire Council's resource challenges in that area are well known. Will the Secretary of State commit to putting extra resource into social care in Shropshire so that the medically fit can be discharged into the community when they are ready?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this issue, and the whole House heard just before the recess the results of the independent work done by Donna Ockenden. The hon. Lady is right to talk about that and the pressure that has been faced locally. I understand that she has already reached out to my hon. Friend the Minister for Health and that he will be meeting her to discuss just that.

NHS Dentistry Backlog

3. **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle the backlog in NHS dentistry appointments. [906511]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): The dental activity threshold has recently been raised to 95% of usual activity. That is another quarter-on-quarter increase to get us towards 100% of pre-pandemic activity. I fully recognise, though, that access to NHS dentistry before the pandemic was patchy and that the crux of the problem is the current NHS dental contract, so work is under way to reform that contract. As negotiations have started, I am limited in what further I can say, but I will update the House as soon as possible.

Tom Hunt: A number of my constituents are finding it impossible to access NHS dental care. They include Alison, one of my constituents who worked as a midwife in Ipswich Hospital for 40 years. Some of them have contacted 40 different practices and have not got anywhere. My understanding is that there has been a 30% drop in the number of dentists taking on NHS work in Suffolk. Will the Minister explain what local work is going on between the Department and the local NHS bodies to try to ensure that this issue is addressed?

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is quite right in his question and is campaigning hard to increase dental activity in his constituency. One of the key pieces of work is being done through Health Education England, which set out a range of recommendations in its "Advancing Dental Care" review. That will do a number of things,

such as increase the skill mix and scope of practitioners across dental teams, and we may well require legislation to bring some of that work forward. Health Education England is also introducing more flexible routes into dental training and doing some workforce modelling to identify the parts of the country with the biggest gaps in provision, so that we can establish centres of dental development in those areas. I will look at Ipswich in particular.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): My constituent contacted me to tell me that when she broke her canine and went to contact her NHS dentist, she found she had been kicked off the list and was facing a bill of £4,000, which she simply does not have, to have the work done privately. Will the Minister speak to some of the dental practices about the possibility of relaxing their rules on kicking people off their dental lists, especially as covid has meant that patients might have had legitimate reasons for missing appointments?

Maria Caulfield: I am sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's constituent's experience. There is not actually a list system for dentists as there is for GPs, so patients can see any dentist when they have a dental issue. With that said, we have asked dental practices to update their availability for NHS patients on the website. This morning, I looked at the website to see what availability there was throughout the country and saw that many dentists still have not updated their availability, so I will ask officials—particularly in her constituency—to update the lists so that patients can access NHS dentistry more easily.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I join the Minister in thanking dentists and their associates for getting so much of the service back. Does she agree that in places such as the Arun parts of my constituency, where people cannot find a dentist and have not been able to for two or three years, there must be a way for people to get on a dentist's list and get treated, and for dentists to be properly rewarded? Dentists and patients would be grateful for a change in the contract.

Maria Caulfield: The Father of the House is quite right that the crux of the problem is that there is a shortage throughout the country not of dentists but of dentists taking on NHS work. The contract is the nub of the problem, which is why work is under way to reform it. We will shortly announce some short-term changes and some longer-term reforms, which will hopefully help my hon. Friend's constituents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that dentists are now determined to turn their practices wholly private as they cannot make ends meet with NHS prices, will the Minister pledge to review NHS payments to stop the haemorrhaging of NHS dentistry provision?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Gentleman is correct that the units of dental activity payments are a perverse disincentive. Sometimes, when someone needs more extensive work, their dentist is paid the same as they would be for, say, one or two simple fillings. That is the nub of the problem and we are currently in negotiations on the matter.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister is right to talk about the contracts with dentists, but should she not also look at how dentistry is structured and the regional nature of the contracting? It sits outside our clinical commissioning groups, which reduces co-ordination and accountability in respect of something that is central to our health. Should this not change?

Maria Caulfield: My right hon. Friend is right. Health Education England is addressing the overall system of where dentists are training and where the gaps in provision are filled in its "Advancing Dental Care" review. It is also working with commissioners at a local level to develop more opportunities in those places that we term dental deserts, where there is currently a lack of provision.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): NHS dentistry is in crisis. Patients are stuck with either a never-ending wait for an NHS appointment or footing the bill for going private, which is simply not an option for most families suffering rising bills and taxes. With a third of the population experiencing untreated tooth decay, when will this Government, who have had 12 years to do so, finally come up with some practical solutions that put patients' needs first, rather than the half-baked, unworkable ideas we have heard to date?

Maria Caulfield: I am sorry to hear that tone from the hon. Lady. We are working under Labour's 2006 dental contract, and she may have missed that dentists were unable to offer any routine care during the pandemic over the last two years, which we have slowly worked up to 95% of usual activity. She may want to play politics with this issue, but perhaps she should speak to her Labour colleagues who run the NHS in Wales, where 6% of dental posts were lost last year. She should get her own side in order before lecturing this side of the House.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): With the exception of the previous question, I do not think that anybody on either side of the House who has raised this issue is playing politics, because a pattern is emerging of a backlog and problems in accessing NHS dentistry. An increasing number of constituents are contacting me having gone to their NHS dentist with an acute dental problem only to be told either that NHS patients are no longer being seen or that they have fallen off the list, as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) mentioned. How can Ministers help in the short term? I know the long-term answer is around the contract—I used to give that answer when I was in her seat—but will the Minister please meet me over a cup of tea so that we can try, as a starter for 10, get to the bottom of this?

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We have had many cross-party meetings with colleagues about dentistry, with many raising constituency issues that we have followed up. He could speak to his local commissioners, because there can sometimes be local problems with the commissioning of dental services. However, now that we are moving towards 95% of usual activity—a significant change compared with last year—I hope that his constituents will be able to access services more easily.

NHS Ear Irrigation and Microsuction

4. **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of access to NHS ear irrigation and microsuction treatments. [906512]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Ear wax services are the responsibility of local commissioners, who are responsible for meeting local healthcare needs. Depending on a local area's arrangements, services should be undertaken either at local primary care practices or through referrals to appropriate local NHS services.

Steve McCabe: Well, I obviously want to thank the Minister for that answer, but I was recently contacted by a constituent who complained that she was told by her GP surgery that such services were no longer available on the NHS and that she should consider obtaining them privately. This is happening despite recent studies that link the effect of impacted cerumen with cognitive decline and dementia. Will the Minister consider writing to clinical commissioning groups to remind them of their obligations and patient entitlements?

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. There has been no national removal of ear wax services, which can still be commissioned locally. NICE guidance is clear on the types of services that should be commissioned. Traditional methods of manual ear syringing are no longer offered for safety reasons, but electronic irrigation and microsuction should be being offered. If his local CCG is not commissioning such services, I am happy to meet him and them to discuss why not.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): GPs provided the service for decades. We all understand why the NICE guidance means that they no longer offer syringing, but there is a gap in that many clinical commissioning groups are not offering alternative services. We are talking about people with dementia or receiving end-of-life care who literally cannot hear and are going deaf. The Minister must be direct with CCGs on this issue.

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is right that there must be consistency across the country in how those procedures are commissioned. After today's questions I will take this up with officials to see why that is not happening consistently across the country.

Regional Health Inequalities

5. **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle regional health inequalities. [906513]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): I am determined to tackle unfair disparities in health outcomes. That is why I launched the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. OHID's regional directors of public health will work with local government and the wider health system to empower local partners with the tools they need to respond to disparities in their regional and local areas. We will also publish a

health disparities White Paper later this year, with a strong focus on prevention, to improve health for the whole population.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, but a decade of under-investment and mismanagement have left 4.5 million people on waiting lists and staff shortages of more than 100,000 people even before we entered the pandemic, which exacerbated health inequalities. I welcome the work his Department is doing, but the reality is that people who live in a constituency such as mine are twice as likely to end up on a waiting list for treatment for more than a year as those in better-off areas. While I welcome what he has announced today, may I ask that he puts in appropriate investment to go along with tackling those appalling health inequalities?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to talk about the importance of tackling health inequalities; on that we absolutely agree, and I hope she will contribute to the health disparities White Paper that I mentioned a moment ago. However, it is wrong of her to suggest that some of the current challenges we face are because of under-investment or because of a smaller workforce than otherwise. We have the largest investment ever going into the NHS. Its budget this year is bigger than the GDP of Greece. It is the highest amount ever, rising by billions each year. We also have more going to social care than ever before, and the highest level of workforce that the NHS has ever seen in its history.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): Surely one of the cruellest health inequalities is in fertility treatment. Of the 106 CCGs in the country, only six limit the age at which women can have in vitro fertilisation treatment to 35, and two of those are in Hampshire. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can end that most devastating of postcode lotteries?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right, and of course I will be happy to meet her and discuss this further, but I can also tell her that that is one of the key things we will be covering in our upcoming women's health strategy.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Andrew Gwynne.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Warm words from the Secretary of State, but people in the most deprived parts of England are almost three times as likely to lose their lives from an avoidable cause as those in the least deprived areas. With the cost of living soaring and the Resolution Foundation estimating that 1.3 million people will be pushed into poverty as a result of the Chancellor's spring statement, those inequalities will worsen. Why will the Secretary of State not just admit that his Government have failed the poorest communities, and start doing something about it?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman acts as though health inequalities are something that has just emerged under this Government. There have been long-running health inequalities in this country over decades under successive Governments, and this Government are putting in record investment and coming up with the ideas to deal with them. As ever, the Labour party has no idea how to deal with the challenges this country faces.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Mental health is a serious challenge of our time. It is totally unacceptable that waiting times, average number of sessions and minimum number of sessions differ according to which part of the country someone lives in. Sadly, recent statistics show that in Stoke-on-Trent people are taking their own lives at double the national average. That is why I am proud to support the cross-party “No Time to Wait” campaign, led by James Starkie with the backing of *The Daily Telegraph* and the Royal College of Nursing, for the provision of mental health nurses in GP surgeries, which could make a real difference to those who bravely come forward asking for help. Will my right hon. Friend meet me, hon. Members of this House who are supportive, and James to discuss how we can make that possible?

Sajid Javid: Yes, of course; I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and others to discuss the campaign. He speaks with passion and I know this is something he has long campaigned on. I have had time to look at some of the content of the campaign, but I would certainly be happy to discuss it further.

NHS Waiting Lists: Southampton

6. **Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce NHS waiting lists in Southampton. [906514]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): Reducing waiting lists and waiting times, exacerbated of course by the impact of the pandemic, is a key priority for this Government. Southampton, like the rest of the country, will benefit from the detailed actions set out in the elective recovery plan published by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State a few months ago. In addition, as part of Solent Acute Alliance hospital upgrade programme, University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust has received £12.1 million to increase capacity at Southampton General Hospital.

Dr Whitehead: The hospital trust in Southampton, which is an excellent provider, is desperate to get back to elective surgery and non-life-threatening procedures, but finds that it cannot because it cannot integrate covid treatment into general ward activities, and has a continuing high level of staff sickness, which means that procedures are often undertaken very inefficiently in terms of resources. What assistance can the Minister provide for the trust to enable it to get on the front foot as regards elective procedures and non-life-threatening treatments in the near future?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman rightly pays tribute to the staff at his hospital trust, and I join him in doing so. The number of those in his area waiting for an elective procedure or routine operation has reduced slightly. There is more to do, but the trust is making inroads, as he says, and I know that it wants to do more. As we set out in the elective recovery plan, some innovations, such as surgical hubs, allow a greater separation between covid areas, or areas where covid may be present, and elective activity is a key part of that. If it is helpful, I am always happy to meet him to discuss the specifics of his local hospital.

Poor Housing Conditions: Health Outcomes

7. **Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle the effect of poor housing conditions on health outcomes. [906515]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): The Government are committed to tackling poor-quality housing. In the social housing White Paper, we committed to a review of the decent homes standard to test whether it is up to date and reflects current needs and expectations. The levelling-up White Paper sets out a commitment to halve levels of non-decency in all rented homes by 2030, with the biggest improvements in the poorest-performing areas. These reforms will have a positive impact on health, and we will work closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to support their implementation.

Ian Lavery: The NHS spends a staggering £2.5 billion-plus annually on treating people with illnesses directly linked to living in cold, damp and dangerous conditions. As a consequence, severe respiratory diseases such as asthma, mesothelioma and other asbestos-related diseases are on the increase, mainly in the most deprived areas. Sadly, more and more people are dying. How does the Government's levelling-up policy plan to tackle this increasingly urgent health issue?

Maggie Throup: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important issue that we are determined to tackle. Housing is one of the key determinants of health. A decent home can promote good health and protect from illness and harm. As he said, poor housing conditions have severe consequences for mental and physical health. That is why we are determined, not just through the levelling-up White Paper but through the health disparities White Paper that will be published later this year, to set out a bold ambition to reduce the gap in health outcomes and the actions that the Government will be taking to address the wider determinants of health, including the impact of poor housing on health.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): In North Devon it is not just the quality of housing that is causing health issues but the lack of availability of affordable housing and a complete collapse of the private rental sector, which is creating mental health issues among my constituents and also means that my much-loved North Devon District Hospital is struggling to recruit adequate local medical services. What steps is the Department taking to try to address these concerns?

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend raises an important issue specific to her area, and other areas that attract people who go there for their holidays and are perhaps not there on a permanent basis. We are determined through our White Papers to address every health inequality, whether caused by a moving population or a static population, in the sorts of areas that the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) talked about.

Cancer Treatment Backlogs: Derbyshire and England

8. **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the scale of the backlog in cancer treatments in (a) Derbyshire and (b) England. [906516]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Cancer treatment and diagnosis remained a top priority throughout the pandemic, with 4.4 million urgent referrals during the period and over 1 million people receiving cancer treatment. Thanks to the brilliant work of our NHS staff, first treatments for cancer have been maintained at above 94% of usual levels over the course of the pandemic. However, we know that fewer people came forward, so we are now seeing record numbers of people coming through the system, with November last year having the highest number of 11,000 cancer referrals per working day.

Mr Perkins: I asked specifically about Derbyshire, but I did not get an answer. Derbyshire clinical commissioning group has failed to reach any of the cancer referral targets for the most recent 12 months. Although this is a national failure, the shortages are particularly acute in Derbyshire. These failures have tragic consequences. My constituent Paul Bryan is just 58. He has been attending his surgery for two years; he kept getting dismissed and was not tested, and now the prostate cancer that was undiagnosed for all that time has spread to his ribs, spine and bones, and his diagnosis is terminal. His family are urging the Government to show more urgency to improve outcomes, so that other families do not have to experience such needless heartbreak. Will the Minister explain to the Bryans why the Government rejected the workforce planning amendment to the Health and Care Bill that could have helped our NHS get the cancer specialists it needs and prevented heartbreak like the Bryans' in other families?

Maria Caulfield: I am sorry to hear about the case of the Bryan family, but I reassure the hon. Gentleman that, in Derby and Derbyshire, 92% of treatments start within 30 days, despite record numbers of patients coming forward. To tackle the issue of getting people diagnosed earlier, which is key to getting more successful treatment, we are rolling out rapid diagnostic centres across the country so that people can access screening and testing much more quickly and easily. We have 159 of those live right now, with more to follow.

Personalised Healthcare

9. David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the delivery of personalised healthcare. [906518]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): Personalised healthcare is a key priority in my reform agenda. I recently set out a new ambition: that as many as 4 million people benefit from personalised care by 2024, covering everything from social prescribing to personalised support plans. We are also on track to deliver 200,000 personal health budgets and integrated personal budgets by 2023-24.

David Simmonds: I welcome the Secretary of State's answer. My constituents are still telling me that they are experiencing some delays beyond the NHS guidelines on diagnosis for special treatment. What plans does my right hon. Friend have to address the lack of capacity and need for capacity in specialty-trained doctors and specialist diagnostic equipment, to make personalised care a reality?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention the importance of the workforce and medical equipment. He will be reassured to know that the NHS has more doctors and nurses working for it than ever before, with more in training than ever before. We are investing record amounts of capital for new medical equipment, including investment in some 160 new community diagnostic centres, which will all include the latest, state-of-the-art diagnostic equipment.

Mental Health Support for Veterans and Military Charities

10. Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of mental health support for veterans and military charities. [906519]

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): NHS England has several bespoke services for veterans, including Op Courage, the veterans' mental health and wellbeing service, which provides a complete mental health care pathway for veterans. Veterans can benefit from personalised care plans, ensuring that they can access support and treatment both in and out of hours. As part of the care and support available to veterans, Op Courage works with military charities and local organisations to provide healthcare and address wider health and wellbeing needs, including for drug and alcohol addiction.

Ms Qaisar: My constituency of Airdrie and Shotts has a long military history, with many people having previously served in the armed forces. When I meet veterans from my constituency, we often discuss the mental health of veterans. The war in Ukraine will undoubtedly have an immediate and lasting impact on the mental health of veterans, as they may be reminded of their experiences of war. To help support our veterans, will the Department come forward with a package of emergency funding for armed forces mental health charities?

Gillian Keegan: The hon. Lady raises a very good question. Last year, we committed an additional £2.7 million to further expand Op Courage following the recent events in Afghanistan, and NHS England has put in place several bespoke services and initiatives to meet the needs of our armed forces community. In addition to Op Courage, there is the veterans trauma network, the veterans prosthetic panel and the veteran-friendly GP accreditation scheme, but given ongoing events in Ukraine, we will of course keep everything under review. I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss further what may be required.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Minister, Dr Rosena Allin-Khan.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Our veterans have risked their lives for our country and deserve excellent mental health support. We must go even further: from the military frontline to frontline workers who have kept us safe, everyone deserves proper mental health provision. People have stepped up to protect our country and save lives during the pandemic, so is it any wonder that teachers and NHS staff are so furious with the comments made by the hon. Member for Lichfield

(Michael Fabricant), about how they would go back to the staffroom and have a “quiet drink”, in an attempt to justify the indefensible actions of the Prime Minister? What does this say about the effect of mental health on our frontline staff? Will the Minister please condemn those comments and apologise for the hurt caused by those remarks?

Gillian Keegan: I am very happy to say that we of course thank very much all the staff who have been on the frontline, whether veterans or teachers, and involved in everything that kept us going throughout the pandemic. We are of course very much aware of the impact of those stresses and strains on mental health. There is additional support for mental health, and there will continue to be additional support for young people’s mental health and for adult mental health. That is one reason why I launched a call for evidence last week to inform a new 10-year cross-departmental mental health vision, and I urge everybody to input into that process before it closes on 5 July.

NHS Workforce Planning

11. **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): What recent progress his Department has made on NHS (a) short-term and (b) long-term workforce planning. [906520]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): The workforce are the heart of our NHS, and I join the Minister for Care and Mental Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), and Opposition Members in paying tribute and putting on record our thanks to those who work in the NHS. In the short term, the NHS has well-established processes to ensure that the health service has the right number of staff with the right skills, and that is alongside our investment in workforce expansion, including delivering 50,000 more nurses over the course of this Parliament. For the longer term, we have commissioned Health Education England to set out the key drivers of workforce supply and demand. It is due to report this spring. Building on that, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has commissioned NHS England to develop a long-term workforce framework. We will share the conclusions in due course.

Kirsty Blackman: The anti-immigration, “hostile environment” rhetoric and actions of this Government are having a significant impact on our NHS workforce, both by not encouraging people to come here to work in our NHS and by discouraging current staff from staying here. The Health and Social Care Committee recommended the introduction of a national policy framework on migration to support national and local workforce planning. When will the Government implement that recommendation?

Edward Argar: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. We are clear, and always have been clear, about how much we value the huge contribution that overseas workers in our NHS make towards keeping our health service up and running, and delivering first-class care every day. There are three strands to our approach to building and increasing our workforce. The first is increasing the numbers of people training in this country and the second is increasing retention. The third focuses on the workforce who come from overseas and who are

incredibly welcome here. Indeed, the number of people coming from countries outside the EU into our NHS workforce has increased.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Ind): The Minister will be aware that I have highlighted the challenge for rural areas in developing a workforce plan on a number of occasions. Indeed, the last report from the all-party parliamentary group on rural health and social care made 10 recommendations, including for how we might address workforce planning in rural areas. Will the Minister advise me of what steps he has taken to put in place any of those recommendations to improve the plight of those living in rural areas?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who takes a close interest in this issue, which she and I have discussed on a number of occasions. She is right to highlight the challenges that some more remote or rural communities can face in securing the workforce they need to meet their communities’ needs. The HEE work and the subsequent workforce framework will be looking at that across the whole range of different geographies and the challenges they face.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The Scottish Government have recently bought Carrick Glen, a private healthcare hospital, in order for it to become part of the national network of treatment centres, which once fully operational will have capacity for over 40,000 additional surgeries and procedures each year. In contrast, the UK Government have taken the path of further privatisation of the NHS, so what recent assessment has the Minister made of the impact on the workforce of further privatisation of NHS England?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and had we been going further down the route of privatisation, his question might have had a little more resonance. What we are doing in the NHS in England is investing in our workforce and investing in our national health service, while of course working closely with the independent sector to maximise the use of its capacity in parallel to make sure we bring down waiting lists and waiting times.

Topical Questions

T1. [906499] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): Our healthcare system is standing at a crossroads, and sooner or later we will have to make a choice between endlessly going back to the taxpayer to ask for more money and reforming the way in which we do healthcare in our country. Last month, I unveiled an ambitious new programme of reform, setting out how we are going to prioritise prevention, offer more personalised care, deliver improvements in performance and back the people making the difference in the NHS. The objective of this agenda is simple: to bring about the biggest transfer of power and funding in decades from our ever-expanding state to individuals, their families and their communities.

Mr Robertson: In Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, 30% of patients do not medically need to be in hospital; they are waiting for discharge. That figure is twice the national average. Will one of the Ministers contact the relevant people in the health service in Gloucestershire to ask them for ways in which the Government could help them to reduce that figure, because as it stands lives are being put at risk?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise this. We are already in contact with the acute trust in Gloucestershire and some of the other trusts that are finding delayed discharge a particular challenge. My hon. Friend will know that, because of the pandemic, what has been a long-term challenge has become much more acute, not least because of the lost beds due to infection protection control and staff absences both in healthcare and in social care. Our delayed discharge taskforce is making a difference—the numbers are coming down overall—but we will be working with Gloucestershire.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Why does the Health Secretary think he has any licence to lecture the British people on their moral duty to pay taxes when he spent so many years avoiding his own?

Sajid Javid *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not quite sure that is relevant in topical questions.

Sajid Javid: I am very happy to answer if you will allow me, Mr Speaker. The hon. Gentleman could have asked me a question on anything to do with health and care—anything he wanted—but instead he chooses to talk about my personal affairs before public life. That was his choice. He could have asked me about the covid backlogs that he pretends he cares so much about. He could perhaps have given me suggestions—

Mr Speaker: Order. Secretary of State, I have got it. These are questions about your responsibilities. Now we can have another try—Wes Streeting.

Wes Streeting: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would just say to the Secretary of State that he should be careful what he wishes for. I hope he will at least reply to the letter I sent him last Thursday—I will place a copy in the Library of the House. He has been stonewalling journalists' questions, but since he says he wants to talk about the Government's record, let me ask him about that instead. We went into the pandemic with NHS waiting lists already at 4.5 million. We went into the pandemic with NHS staff shortages of 100,000. We went into the pandemic with social care staffing vacancies of 112,000. So it is not just the case that the Tories did not fix the roof while the sun was shining; they dismantled the roof, removed the floorboards and now they have no plan to fix it. Where is the Secretary of State's plan to fix the NHS crisis?

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, I remind Members that topicals are short and punchy questions, not lengthy statements. A lot of Back Benchers on both sides deserve to get in to raise constituency matters, so please let us give them time. I do not want a lengthy fall-out, and these are Health questions.

Sajid Javid: Mr Speaker, you have been very generous to the hon. Gentleman: you gave him another try, but that was another failure to ask a question. Again, the hon. Gentleman is not asking about the serious issues, which again shows that he will play petty party politics and that Labour has no plan for the challenges this country faces.

Mr Speaker: May I just reassure the Secretary of State for Health that I was not being generous? The shadow Secretary of State had two questions, so I have not been generous in any shape, way or form.

T2. [906500] **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): We have all seen the disturbing scenes in Shanghai recently. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this shows how dangerous a zero covid strategy is and that we were right to open up this country and to rely on our vaccines as the safest way out of the covid situation?

Sajid Javid: Like many across the House I have been deeply disturbed by the reports we have all seen from Shanghai and my thoughts are with the people affected. It shows what a dangerous fallacy this whole idea of zero covid was, and it also shows that we are the most open country in Europe and that we have got the big decisions right. We did not listen to the Opposition when they said we should not open up in the summer, and we did not listen to them when they again called for restrictions in the winter. We are showing the world how to live with covid.

T3. [906501] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents have been forced on to private and unaffordable dental plans or they have to wait up to five years to see an NHS dentist. The situation is getting worse and worse, so I met with the groundbreaking Hull York Medical School to see if it can assist in training a future generation of dentists and it is keen to help; what is the Minister doing to work with medical schools?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Come on; we have got to get others in.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (**Maria Caulfield**): I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and we have met to discuss this previously. I am happy to discuss with Health Education England whether one of its centres for dentist development could be suitable for her constituency.

T6. [906504] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): In 2019 Kettering General Hospital, which serves my constituency, was promised £46 million for a major upgrade. Three years later the hospital still has not got the money. Secretary of State, will you go out and buy a very big pair of scissors, cut through the red tape and get it sorted?

The Minister for Health (**Edward Argar**): No one, with the possible exception of my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), is more passionate than my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) about seeing improvements delivered in their local hospital, and I had the pleasure of visiting. As my

hon. Friend will know, the £46 million was allocated originally for an urgent treatment centre; the hospital asked that that be changed and it folded in with the overall programme. It has yet to submit a business case for the enabling works; when it does, I will make sure that it is expedited.

T4. [906502] **Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): The gap in life expectancy between people living in the richest and poorest areas is once again growing. That affects my constituents directly. I have heard nothing to date that tells me what the Secretary of State is going to do to narrow the gap; Secretary of State, what will you do to protect my constituents?

Sajid Javid: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, I know his constituency well; it is my birthplace. He might also know that just a couple of months ago I visited his constituency and met members of the local community at the Deepdish community centre to talk about exactly what he has rightly raised today: the importance of tackling inequalities in Rochdale and beyond. We will set out our plans in our upcoming health disparities White Paper.

T9. [906507] **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): The Cass review interim report found that to date there is a profound lack of evidence on the best approach to treat gender dysphoria in children. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that in spite of this the NHS insists on making a child's expressed gender identity the start-point for treatment, and my surprise that the NHS has chosen so far not to track patient outcomes, particularly for under-18s?

Sajid Javid: I share my hon. Friend's concerns, which is why the NHS commissioned this review from one of our top paediatricians. It is already clear to me from her interim findings and the other evidence I have seen that NHS services in this area are too narrow; they are overly affirmative and in fact are bordering on ideological. That is why in this emerging area, of course we need to be absolutely sensitive, but we also need to make sure that holistic care is provided, that there is not a one-way street and that all medical interventions are based on the best clinical evidence.

T5. [906503] **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Streatham) (Lab): Since February 2020 my local borough of Lambeth has seen a 14% drop in dementia diagnosis. That means people are not getting the support that comes from diagnosis. We also know that so far none of the announced £8 billion backlog funding has been dedicated to addressing the stagnation of diagnosis rates. Can the Secretary of State explain what exactly he is going to do to make sure that people get diagnosed on time?

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): The hon. Lady raises a very important question. We want a society in which every person with dementia and their families and carers receive high-quality, compassionate care from diagnosis through to end of life. We have provided £17 million this financial year to NHS England and NHS Improvement to increase the number of diagnoses. That funding was spent in a range of ways, including investing in the workforce to increase capacity in memory assessment services.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Jeremy Hunt.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): The Secretary of State will have read the scandal exposed in *The Sunday Times* this weekend that six babies are born every month after being exposed to sodium valproate, which has been known for many years to cause disabilities. Last year the Government consulted on putting warning labels on valproate. Is it not time to go much further and ban the prescription of sodium valproate to epileptic pregnant mothers?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is right to raise this, and many of us will have seen the recent reports, especially from the families affected. It is right that we reconsider this and make sure that sodium valproate, and any other medicine, is given only in the clinically appropriate setting.

T7. [906505] **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right that we all want to get to the bottom of many important health matters, and we do not want what he described as personal affairs to get in the way of that. In order to ensure that the House concentrates entirely on those matters, will he welcome HMRC investigating whether he was claiming non-dom status on a solely—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us move on. What a waste of a question. Dehenna Davison.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will try not to make this one a waste. I was grateful to the Minister for meeting me to discuss my ongoing campaign to restore the A&E to Bishop Auckland Hospital. Many of my constituents face a long drive to get to Darlington or Durham, and given that swift treatment can be a significant factor in outcomes for conditions such as strokes and heart attacks, does he agree that having A&E services spread geographically rather than just in strong population centres is an essential part of keeping our community safe?

Edward Argar: I did indeed have a positive and constructive meeting with my hon. Friend. It is right that we have access geographically spread to A&E services, but the decisions are rightly taken by clinical commissioners on the basis of clinical evidence. I know that she will continue fighting the corner for the reopening of her local A&E with tenacity and passion.

T8. [906506] **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The 10-year cancer plan that the Secretary of State has announced is a key opportunity to ensure that future services are designed with the patient at their core, especially for those living with cancer. What steps is his Department taking to engage with under-represented groups in the development of the 10-year cancer plan, and will he agree to meet with Macmillan Cancer Support to discuss how it can provide support in this key area?

Sajid Javid: I would be pleased to have the meeting that the hon. Lady has suggested. She should know that we just closed the consultation on the 10-year cancer plan. There has been a fantastic response. She may also

have seen the announcement that we made today about lung cancer health checks. With improvements like that, we intend to do a lot more.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): One of the best ways to maximise NHS capacity is to increase people's access to GP appointments and treatments such as mental health services and physiotherapy in their own communities. Will the Minister join me in backing our bid for a new health centre in East Leake and in calling on Nottinghamshire's clinical commissioning group to prioritise funds for this vital service?

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I had an excellent visit to the surgery in East Leake, and I look forward to the submission of the business case so that we can look at it further. She is right that investing in primary care does a huge amount to support the health of the local community.

T10. [906508] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): A survey by the charity stem4 has found that 95% of GPs believe that children and adolescent mental health services are in crisis, with children and young people waiting up to two years for treatment after referral. Will the Secretary of State stop treating children as an afterthought and act to provide open access mental health hubs for young people in every community, to put an end to these agonising waits?

Gillian Keegan: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. I know that children's mental health services are treating more young people than ever. However, the demand has quadrupled since the pandemic and that is why we have invested £79 million in these services. By 2023-24, an extra 345,000 more young people will be accessing support. I mentioned the call for evidence. It is important that we work through our vision for our 10-year plan. We are also introducing mental health support teams in schools, which will help, plus access to community and mental health hubs, and more young people will have access to eating disorder services, but there is a lot of work ongoing.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I know from discussions with constituents that needle phobias are a real thing. Will my right hon. Friend therefore tell the House what support the Government are giving to intranasal vaccine delivery systems to ensure that the maximum number of people take up the vaccine?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): The Department of Health and Social Care commissioned research through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, co-funded with UK Research and Innovation, for an Imperial College London study, worth £580,000, looking specifically at the safety and effectiveness of two covid-19 vaccines administered by respiratory tract. The study is ongoing, but it is in the later stages of the phase one clinical trial, and the results will be made public in due course, following peer review.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Those providing social care often work long hours and are a real lifeline for the most vulnerable. Will the Minister

act to ensure that those in social care are paid properly with a real living wage, as Citizens UK is campaigning for?

Gillian Keegan: Actually, according to Skills for Care data from 2020-21, the majority of care workers were paid above the national living wage in that year. Most care workers are employed by private sector providers who set their terms and conditions. However, we have committed £1.36 billion to the market sustainability and fair cost fund, which will support local authorities to move towards paying providers a fair cost of care. We hope that will lead to better sustainability and better staff.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): At Prime Minister's questions, I raised a local campaign for a specialist menopause clinic in Devon. I am pleased the Minister agreed to meet me. Will my hon. Friend encourage local NHS leaders to fund specialist menopause centres?

Maria Caulfield: The Government recognise that menopause services need to improve, which is why menopause is a priority area in our women's health strategy. We recognise such services are often best provided in primary care, but that some women need specialist services. We are looking at that in our women's health strategy and the menopause taskforce.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): In December last year, the Department of Health and Social Care promised three urgent actions to tackle the gender health gap: the appointment of a women's health ambassador; legislation to ban hymenoplasty; and the publication of the women's health strategy for England in spring 2022. Can I ask the Minister when those vital actions are actually going to happen?

Maria Caulfield: I can let the hon. Lady know that interviews have taken place for a women's health ambassador. We are expecting an announcement on the appointment any day now. We will be publishing the women's health strategy in the coming weeks.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome all that my right hon. Friend is doing to address health inequalities. However, could I ask him to look carefully at public health funding for my borough of Bexley, as we are seriously underfunded compared with similar boroughs in London?

Sajid Javid: I would be very pleased to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss that further. I am sure he will welcome the publication of the upcoming health disparities White Paper.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): In a recent survey by Carers UK, almost half of unpaid carers said that they are currently unable to manage their monthly energy bills and expenses, and that any further increases would negatively affect their own physical and mental health, or that of the person they care for. What steps are being taken, along with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, to support those hard-working exhausted unpaid carers with the cost of living?

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and of course we have a great deal of gratitude for every unpaid carer. Around 360,000 carer households on universal credit can receive an additional £2,000 a year through the carer element. The weekly rate of carer's

allowance increased to £69.70 in April 2022. Also, real-terms expenditure on carer's allowance is forecast to increase by around £1.3 billion. In addition, there is a big focus, in our reforms and in the White Paper, on what more we need to do to support unpaid carers.

Global Migration Challenge

3.39 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the United Kingdom's approach to the global migration challenge.

The United Kingdom has a long and proud history of offering sanctuary to refugees. In recent years alone, we have welcomed more than 185,000 people through safe and legal routes, including from Syria, Hong Kong, Afghanistan and, more recently, Ukraine. In addition, we have welcomed more than 40,000 people in recent years through our refugee family reunion routes. This Government have done more than any other in recent history to support those fleeing persecution, conflict or instability.

But we cannot focus our support on those who need it most or effectively control our borders without tackling illegal migration, which is facilitated by people smugglers—serious organised criminals who profit from human misery, who do not care about people drowning in the channel or suffocating in the back of containers. We must break their lethal and evil business model by removing the demand for their repugnant activities. This type of illegal migration puts unsustainable pressures on our public services and local communities. Every day, the broken asylum system costs the taxpayer almost £5 million in hotel accommodation alone. The cost of the asylum system is the highest in over two decades at over £1.5 billion.

As the Prime Minister said last week:

“We cannot sustain a parallel illegal system. Our compassion may be infinite, but our capacity to help people is not.”

That is why the new plan for immigration and its legislative vehicle—the Nationality and Borders Bill—are so vital. Once again, I urge hon. Members and Members in the other place to follow this elected House in backing the Bill.

At the heart of this Government's approach is a simple principle: fairness. Access to the UK's asylum system should be based on need, not on the ability to pay people smugglers. More than 80 million people around the world are displaced. Others are on the move because they want a better life. There is a global migration crisis that demands innovative and international solutions, and this Government are taking firm action.

When we published the new plan for immigration back in March last year, we set out three very clear objectives: to increase the fairness and efficacy of our system so that we can better protect and support those in genuine need of asylum; to deter illegal and dangerous routes of entry to the UK, thereby breaking the business model of criminal smuggling networks and protecting the lives of those they endanger; and to remove more easily from the UK those with no right to be here.

The Ministry of Defence has taken command of small boat operations in the channel. Every small boat incident will be investigated to determine who piloted the boat and could therefore be liable for prosecution. These reforms are a truly cross-government effort, including the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Crown Prosecution Service, Border Force and the Ministry of Justice.

A nationwide dispersal system will be introduced so that asylum pressures are more equally spread across local authorities. Currently, 53% of local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales do not accommodate asylum seekers under the dispersal system. It is simply unfair that a national burden should be felt disproportionately by certain areas of the country.

For the first time, the Government are building asylum reception centres to end the practice of housing asylum seekers in expensive hotels. A new reception centre in Linton-on-Ouse in North Yorkshire will open shortly. Far from being outlandish, as some in the Opposition have commented, asylum reception centres are already operational in safe EU countries such as Greece and they are funded by the EU.

Just last week, I signed a new world-leading migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda. Under this partnership, those who travel to the UK by illegal and dangerous routes, including by small boats across the channel, may be relocated to Rwanda, where they will have their asylum claims considered. Those in need of protection will be given up to five years of support, including education and employment training and help with integration, accommodation and healthcare, so that they can thrive there. The UK is supporting this investment in Rwanda over five years, boosting the Rwandan economy and increasing opportunities for people living there, further cementing the trading and diplomatic relationship between our countries.

This is a bespoke international agreement reached last week with Rwanda; I came to Parliament as soon as was reasonably practicable following the conclusion of that agreement. The agreement is compatible with all our domestic and international legal obligations. Rwanda is a state party to the 1951 United Nations refugee convention and the seven core United Nations human rights conventions, and has a strong system for refugee resettlement. The United Nations has used Rwanda for several years to relocate refugees, and of course it was the European Union that first funded that.

This agreement deals a major blow to the people smugglers and their evil trade in human cargo. Everyone who is considered for relocation will be screened and interviewed—that will include an age assessment—and will have access to legal services. In relation to accounting officer advice, contrary to reports in the newspapers, the permanent secretary did not oppose this agreement; nor did he assert that it is poor value for money. Rather, he stated in his role as accounting officer that the policy is regular, proper and feasible, but that there is not currently sufficient evidence to demonstrate value for money.

It is the job of Ministers to take decisions—more often than not, tough decisions—in the interests of our country. Existing approaches have failed, and there is no single solution to these problems—something that I think Opposition Members may have encountered in the past as well. Change is needed, because people are dying attempting to come to the UK by illegal and dangerous routes. This partnership is the type of international co-operation needed to make the global immigration system fairer, keep people safe and give them opportunities to flourish. This will help to break the people smugglers' business model and prevent loss of life, while ensuring protection for those who are genuinely vulnerable.

[Priti Patel]

This Government are delivering the first comprehensive overhaul of the asylum system and of this type of illegal migration in decades. At the heart of this approach is fairness. Access to the UK's asylum system must be based on need, not on the ability to pay people smugglers. The demands on the current system, the cost to British taxpayers and the scandalous abuses are increasing. The British public have rightly had enough. Our new plan for immigration will improve support for those directly fleeing oppression, persecution and tyranny through safe and legal routes. It will deter illegal and dangerous routes of entry to the UK, make it easier to remove those with no right to be in the UK and provide a common-sense approach to controlling immigration, both legal and illegal. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

3.47 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We have seen, over the past week, this unworkable, shameful and desperate attempt to distract from the Prime Minister's lawbreaking. The Home Secretary should not go along with it, because she is undermining not just respect for the rule of law, but her office, by providing cover for him. The policies that she has announced today are unworkable, unethical and extortionate in their cost to the British taxpayer.

There was no information from the Home Secretary about the costs today. Will she admit that the £120 million that she has announced does not pay for a single person to be transferred? She has not actually got an agreement on the price for each person; in fact, £120 million is the eye-watering price that the Home Office is paying just for a press release. What is the rest of the cost? What is this year's budget? How many people will it cover? The Home Office has briefed that it might be £30,000 per person to cover up to three months' accommodation, but that is already three times more than the ordinary cost of dealing with an asylum case in the UK.

The Home Secretary said in her statement that she would provide five years of costs. In Australia, offshoring costs £1.7 million per person, which is over 100 times more than the ordinary asylum cost here. Where will all the money come from to fund the plan? She says that she will save money on hotels, but the only reason why we are paying a fortune in hotel costs is that Home Office decision making has totally collapsed. On the Home Secretary's watch, the Home Office is taking only 14,000 initial asylum decisions a year, half as many as it was taking five years ago. It is taking fewer decisions than Belgium, the Netherlands and Austria, never mind France and Germany. The costs to the UK taxpayer have soared by hundreds of millions of pounds because the Home Secretary is not capable of taking basic asylum decisions—and because she is not capable of taking those decisions, she is trying to pay Rwanda to take them instead. Whether or not people are refugees, whether or not they are victims of modern slavery, whether or not they have family members in the UK and whether or not they have come from Afghanistan, Syria or even Ukraine, the Home Secretary is asking Rwanda to do the job that she is not capable of doing.

The Home Secretary says that this policy will deter boats and traffickers, but the permanent secretary says otherwise: he says that there is no evidence of a deterrent

effect, and that there has been a total failure to crack down on the criminal gangs that are at the heart of this problem. The number of prosecutions for human trafficking and non-sexual exploitation has fallen from 59 in 2015 to just two in 2020. The criminals will not be deterred because someone whom they exploited was sent to Rwanda. They do not give money-back guarantees under which they lose money if their victims end up somewhere else instead. They will just spin more lies. The Home Secretary is totally failing to crack down on criminal gangs. Why does she not get on with her basic job, crack down on human traffickers, do the serious work with France and Belgium to prevent the boats from setting out in the first place—which she did not even mention in her statement—and make decisions fast?

The Home Secretary is using this policy to distract people from years of failure. She promised three years ago to halve the number of crossings, but it has increased tenfold, and this will make trafficking worse. The top police chief and anti-slavery commissioner has said that the Home Secretary's legislation will make it harder to prosecute traffickers. When Israel tried paying Rwanda to take refugees and asylum seekers a few years ago, independent reports showed that that increased people-smuggling and increased the action of the criminal gangs. This is the damage that the Home Secretary is doing. She is making things easier for the criminal gangs and harder for those who need support, at a time when people across our country have come forward to help those who are fleeing Ukraine—to help desperate refugees. Instead of working properly with other countries, the Home Secretary is doing the opposite. All she is doing is making things easier for the criminal gangs.

Will the Home Secretary tell us the facts? Will she tell us about the real costs of this policy, and the real damage that it will do in respect of human trafficking and people-smuggling? Will she come clean to the public, and come clean to the House?

Priti Patel: That response to my statement was, if I may say so, wholly predictable. It is important to say to everyone in the House that we cannot put a price on saving human lives, and I think everyone will respect that completely.

The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) was a Minister in the Blair Government when the powers that give this Government the legal basis for this policy were introduced. When she occupied a seat in the Blair Government, I do not remember her exploding in synthetic rage when all those policies were implemented, after Acts were passed in 1999, 2002 and 2004 to bring about similar partnerships—the same partnerships, by the way, that were used to establish the Dublin regulations to return inadmissible asylum seekers to EU member states. The right hon. Lady has gone on record multiple times attacking the Government for abandoning those regulations, and at the same time calling for a replacement. Now she is attacking the Government for using the very powers that only a few weeks ago she said we could still be using if we had not left the EU.

What we have heard today from the right hon. Lady and the Opposition demonstrates their absolute inability to understand this issue—the differentiation between legal and illegal migration. They should be honest about their policies. They stand for open borders and

uncontrolled immigration. I will, if I may, go even further: the right hon. Lady described the policy as unworkable and extortionate. If it is unworkable, it cannot be extortionate. We will make payments based on delivery. That is the point of our scheme. Nowhere in her response to the statement did the right hon. Lady put forward an alternative that would actually seek to deal with people-trafficking and deaths in the channel. Importantly, the Labour party is being exposed today as having no policy, and no idea how to stop people-smuggling.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): With respect to my right hon. Friend, from what I have heard and seen so far of the removal to Rwanda policy, I do not support it on the grounds of legality, practicality or efficacy. I want to ask her about one specific issue. I understand that only young men, and not families, will be removed. The Home Secretary is shaking her head, so I have obviously misunderstood the policy in that sense. If it is the case that families will not be broken up—the Home Secretary is nodding—where is her evidence that this will not simply lead to an increase in the trafficking of women and children?

Priti Patel: I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss this further, and to give her further information—[*Interruption.*] Calm down and listen. First and foremost, the policy is legal and a memorandum of understanding has been published that states very clearly—[*Interruption.*] Members are not even listening, so there is no point. The MOU states clearly in terms of the legal—[*Interruption.*] If Members are interested in listening to the responses, please do. The MOU that has been published spells out in full detail the legalities and the nature of the agreement. I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) would respect the fact that I am not going to speak about the eligibility criteria on the Floor of the House. [HON. MEMBERS: “Why not?”] Because, as my right hon. Friend will know very well, those types of criteria are used by the smuggling gangs to exploit various loopholes in our laws to do with, for example, legal action to prevent removals. Opposition Members write to me frequently asking me not to remove some of the failed asylum seekers and foreign national offenders who have no legal basis for remaining in our country. I will be happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss this further.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesman, Stuart C. McDonald.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): This is a cruel and catastrophic policy. It will not hurt smugglers, but it will further seriously harm people who have fled persecution. It will do untold damage to the international system of refugee protection, and to what little remains of the UK’s reputation for upholding international law. This is worse than temporary offshoring; it is offloading responsibility altogether. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has said, people fleeing persecution should not be “traded like commodities”, and in the words of the Refugee Council, this is nothing short of cash for deportations. We know that 85% of refugees are in the developing or least developed countries, yet here is the wealthy UK offering them cash to take some more. So much for global Britain.

The only thing that is transparent about this policy is its dodgy timing and grubby political motivation. In the interests of proper transparency, will the Home Secretary finally publish a detailed estimate of how many billions this policy will cost? She was chuntering that she had the deal sorted out, so she should now announce it to Members of the House. And for what are we paying this money? Can she say what percentage of asylum seekers coming to the UK will be subjected to this abysmal treatment? Reports from Rwanda suggest capacity for probably around 1%, but certainly less than 5%. Is that correct? We are told people will be screened before transfer, but how can a pathetic screening interview possibly pick out trafficking survivors, torture victims or LGBT people? Quite simply, it cannot, so is she happy to see those people subjected to this treatment?

Why are women and children within the scope of this policy? Will people going through the screening process be able to access legal advice? Why are we not allowed to see the criteria for deciding who will be sent? Where is the transparency in that? How will she monitor their treatment? Her Government have completely failed to stop abuses in UK detention centres, never mind in centres that are 5,000 miles away. In short, this disastrous policy has nothing to do with the global migration crisis and everything to do with distracting from the Prime Minister’s political crises. It is absolutely sickening, for all that.

Priti Patel: Just for the record, I think the hon. Gentleman’s latter comment was absolutely unacceptable. It does a great disservice not just to this Government and the officials who have worked for over nine months on this partnership, but also to our counterparts in Rwanda who have been working with us, to my international counterparts who are working collectively to tackle the issues of illegal migration, and to some counterparts in the EU as well.

To answer some specific points, I think it is shameful that the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) is playing party political games on that point, just like the Labour party. [*Interruption.*] If the hon. Gentleman lets me answer the question, I will.

The other point is that Rwanda has successfully resettled more than 130,000 refugees. I think the hon. Gentleman’s comments are a slur on the successful efforts of our partners in Rwanda. Rwanda is a safe and secure country with respect for the rule of law. I think hon. Members should listen to the undercurrent of their tone towards Rwanda, which has done a great deal to provide safety, refuge, security and a new life to many refugees from around the world.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the approach we will take. Everyone considered for relocation will be screened and interviewed, they will have access to legal advice, and decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis. Nobody will be removed if it would be unsafe or inappropriate for them.

The hon. Gentleman is not the first hon. Member to mention legal obligations and the legalities. Rwanda is beholden to the same legal obligations on human rights as the United Kingdom and I make the point again that I think there is something really quite unpleasant about the undercurrent of the tone towards Rwanda.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): The latest figures suggest that, in December, more than 7,000 people in Birmingham were claiming asylum support amounting to tens of millions of pounds. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this partnership with Rwanda will reduce the reliance on hotels and reduce the number of small boat crossings?

Priti Patel: There are a number of things—[*Interruption.*] If the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) were less hysterical and actually listened, she might learn something about the new plan for immigration.

It is important to reflect on a number of points. The answer to my hon. Friend's question is yes, because we do not want people to be in hotel accommodation. It is a cheap point for Opposition Members to make, but we had to use hotel accommodation to protect people during the pandemic, and Public Health England guidance spoke to that.

On decision making—[*Interruption.*] If the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury chooses to listen, the new plan for immigration is about speeding up asylum decisions and processing through legislation and the digitalisation of the system. I have to add that, because every single Opposition Member voted against this policy, they clearly want open borders. They just want to have uncontrolled migration, and they have done nothing to come up with an alternative plan on this issue.

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

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The announcement made last week, when Parliament was not sitting, has caused a great deal of confusion about what this policy actually entails. Unfortunately, the Home Secretary turned her head away from the microphone when she responded to the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), so I wonder whether she will answer the question of who will actually be eligible to be sent to Rwanda. Will it be single young men, or will it be women and children? What percentage of asylum seekers does she think will be sent to Rwanda?

Priti Patel: On eligibility, as I have already said, everyone considered for relocation will be screened and interviewed and have the right access to legal advice and services, and decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis. That is absolutely right and proper, but the fundamental principle in relation to this policy and the new plan for immigration, in which I am sure the right hon. Lady is well versed, is that it will apply to people who are inadmissible to our asylum system and to people who have come to our country illegally: through illegal and dangerous routes.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The asylum reception centre to which my right hon. Friend referred will be at Linton-on-Ouse in my constituency. I am not a nimby in any shape or form but, nevertheless, the RAF base on which it will be situated is at the centre of that small rural village. Local people are understandably concerned that this is not an appropriate place to put such a reception centre. Will she meet me to discuss that decision and to see what can be done?

Priti Patel: Absolutely. I want to thank my hon. Friend because he has been in dialogue with Ministers on that issue. I would be very happy to meet him. Of course, he understands the principle behind all of this, so I am very happy to discuss that with him further.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Home Secretary asserts that Labour Members do not understand the issue, but she will be aware that a former permanent secretary at the Home Office, Sir David Normington, said last week about her Rwanda policy:

“It’s inhumane, it’s morally reprehensible, it’s probably unlawful and it may well be unworkable”.

How does she come to know better than a former Home Office permanent secretary?

Priti Patel: First, I am surprised that the right hon. Lady is using Sir David's name in vain, given that a former Labour Home Secretary infamously and discourteously described the Home Office leadership and management as “not fit for purpose” during Sir David's tenure. Things have moved on in terms of the asylum system. Her party and other Opposition Members continuously vote against the new plan for immigration, but they have no plan to deal with these important and difficult issues. It will bring in the reform that our country needs, while making sure that we preserve the efficacy of safe and legal routes for people fleeing persecution to come to our country and get the support they need.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend deserves great personal credit for seeking to tackle the dreadful crisis that exists in the channel, but does she accept that many of us have grave concerns that the policy she has announced simply will not work? On the cost, can she confirm that she will not be using expensive military aircraft to make the 9,000-mile round trip? Also on cost, will she ensure that before the House of Commons votes on this matter tomorrow we know the cost per asylum seeker of those she is sending to Rwanda?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend knows Rwanda incredibly well. We have had many discussions about it and I am very happy to meet him to have further discussions. We will not be using military planes for any removals. He will, like many Members of this House, be pretty familiar with the approach we take to removing failed asylum seekers and foreign national offenders to return them to their country of origin or to third countries. There is a whole process around this, which involves a lot of operational work and detail. I am happy to talk to him privately about that because the ways in which we can do this are complicated. He makes further points that I am happy to discuss with him as well.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary say whether she has negotiated a cap on the cost of this arrangement with Rwanda? What will be the cost per person sent? Is there a limit on that cost? If so, what is it?

Priti Patel: On cost, as I have already published and said, there is an upfront £120 million development cost and, with that, of course, when we remove people, payments will be made accordingly—only once we have removed people to Rwanda.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I am incredibly proud of this country and this Government's track record in providing a safe welcome to more than 185,000 asylum seekers and refugees since 2015, but I hope that my right hon. Friend will be ramping up the welcome for Ukrainian refugees—I know she will be working flat out at it. What I find abhorrent and inexplicable is the way in which many Opposition Members, and even those in the top echelons in the Church of England and in other faiths, seem to have completely forgotten the images of children lying drowned on our beaches. How can they not seek to try to remedy that appalling situation? These people are not refugees and asylum seekers—they are coming from France.

Priti Patel: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments and observations. She will be well aware of the work that our noble Friend Lord Harrington is currently doing in the other place on the Ukrainian scheme in terms of resettling people and bringing people over for the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

The left in particular like to preach compassion, but there is little compassion when they do not have the backbone to make difficult decisions when it comes to the protection of human life. For months and months, they have talked about saving lives and lost lives, and now that there is the prospect of action to save lives and to go after the evil people smugglers, they wring their hands and choose to play party political games.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Members throughout this House are desperately concerned about the children who are often on these boats, so can we have a straight answer from the Home Secretary? Does she intend one of the criteria that prevents somebody from being sent to Rwanda to be their being under 18? Crucially, where will the processing and the decision making as to whether or not somebody is under 18 take place? Please, Home Secretary, be straight and honest with us about what you intend to do with these children. We all deserve better.

Priti Patel: I have already spoken about the processing and the eligibility—[*Interruption.*] Yes, I have. I absolutely have. Operational decisions are for the officials and practitioners on the ground who undertake them. That is part of our process that the hon. Lady should respect.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), was slightly wrong when she talked about human trafficking. This is not human trafficking; this is people smuggling. This is about evil gangs being paid money to take people across the channel. They do not care about the lives of these individuals. The only way we are going to stop the people smuggling is if we reduce the demand for it, and the Home Secretary's Rwanda policy is absolutely right. Does she agree that her policy is morally the right thing to do?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there is a distinction and a significant difference between people trafficking and smuggling. It is the people-smuggling gangs that we are trying to stop. We are trying to break up their business model and end their evil trade, and it is absolutely right that we do so. When it comes to cases of

human trafficking, it is a well-known fact that it is down to the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) with the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and the work of this Government, that we have stood up the legalities and the proper processes to give those people who have been trafficked the legal protection and the safety and security that they need in our country.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Will the Home Secretary tell the House how many people she expects to send to Rwanda in the first 12 months of the scheme? She will be aware that Rwandan Government Ministers are on the record as saying that they expect their capacity to be in the hundreds, with a few thousand over the five-year period. Given that 28,000 people crossed the channel last year, does the Home Secretary really think the scheme is going to have the deterrent effect that she claims for it?

Priti Patel: The answer to the right hon. Gentleman's question is yes. The scheme is uncapped and that is exactly what we have negotiated with the Rwandan Government.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Home Secretary is quite properly focused on saving lives, so may I ask her a practical question? The World Bank has said that Rwanda has one of the highest incidences of malaria in the world. Our own Government website warns travellers about hepatitis A and B, tetanus, typhoid, cholera and tuberculosis, not to mention rabies and dengue fever, which cannot be vaccinated against. What are the Government going to do, both from an ethical and moral point of view and to protect the British taxpayer against compensation claims, to protect the asylum seekers who go to Rwanda?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend makes some important points. The partnership we have undertaken with the Rwandan Government is based not only on direct support, technical expertise, education and training but, as I said in my statement, on providing care in terms of individuals' health and resettlement needs.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): The proposal to treat refugees differently based on how they arrived in the UK undermines a key principle of refugee protection. Such an approach weakens the very foundation of the 1951 refugee convention and contradicts the steps agreed to by the UK upon signing up to the global compact on refugees. What legal assurances did the Government seek about the protection of people in Rwanda, which has an authoritarian regime with one person in power for 30 years?

Priti Patel: I have already been very clear that Rwanda is a safe country. People arriving in the United Kingdom are coming here illegally from safe countries, which is where they should claim asylum in the first place. Rwanda is not just a safe country, as I have said, but one that has resettled over 100,000 refugees. I appreciate that the hon. Lady just mentioned countries in both the EU and UN, both of which have deemed it safe to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, and Rwanda is beholden to the same legal obligations on human rights as the United Kingdom. The hon. Lady's tone towards Rwanda is deeply offensive in the light of our partnership relationship.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does the Home Secretary agree that there is both a moral and financial responsibility to bring small boat crossings to an end and to save lives? That is what this bold package of measures is seeking to do.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I pay tribute to her work with the Home Office as the Member of Parliament for Dover, which has been at the forefront of receiving people coming to the UK, and to her county council, which has been under significant pressure for many years. The dispersal policy, which was first proposed by the leader of Kent County Council, has taken time to be pushed forward, but it will not only have a significant impact on the people and taxpayers of Kent, but see the principle of fairness applied to people who rightly come to our country through legal routes as opposed to those with no legal basis to be in the UK.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): This afternoon the Home Secretary has described Rwanda as a safe and secure country, saying that to suggest otherwise is a slur. However, on at least two occasions only last year, the United Kingdom called for an investigation at the United Nations into torture, deaths in custody, extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances in Rwanda. Was that a slur by the UK, or was it a well-founded request? What was the outcome of the request? What legal assurances has she obtained from Rwanda regarding the treatment of any asylum seekers sent there?

Priti Patel: Under this agreement, as I have said, Rwanda will process claims in accordance with the UN refugee convention and national and international human rights laws. Importantly, it will ensure that individuals are resettled in the right way. Over 130,000 refugees have been resettled in Rwanda, and it is not just a safe country, but one where both the UNHCR and the EU have resettled individuals. Finally, with all partnerships—*[Interruption.]* If hon. Members would like to listen, I will answer the question. We have thorough discussions in all partnerships, and in these negotiations, including those on human rights, we have worked closely with the Rwandan Government on the need to protect vulnerable people seeking safety and a new life.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Home Secretary is right to deal with the issue of criminal people trafficking and to recognise the frustration of many at the length of time it takes to remove people who are here unlawfully from this country. The caveat many of us would enter, however, is whether this scheme will achieve either of those objectives. Can she tell me how she can assume that a set of criteria to determine claims, as clearly must be drawn up, is likely to be free from legal challenge, if the criteria are not published and transparently available? Would it not be much better to invest the significant amounts of money we are talking about in speeding up the work of our current immigration system, in recruiting more immigration tribunal judges and in more investigative resource for the Home Office, so that we can achieve the objectives without the financial and potential legal risks that the current scheme involves?

Priti Patel: We are doing both. My hon. Friend will know that the legislation for the new plan for immigration does exactly that by introducing the one-stop shop for

immigration courts and tribunals, stopping the merry-go-round of various legal practices being used to prevent the removal of individuals with no legal right to be in the United Kingdom and the constant right of appeal in the immigration courts, which slows down the processing of cases. That is the purpose of the new plan for immigration. There are clauses in the Nationality and Borders Bill that, I repeat for the benefit of the House, the entire Opposition voted against, because they do not want to see the issue of illegal migration and reform of the asylum system addressed at all. Those are many of the challenges we are confronted with every single day.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): On the basis of what evidence has the Home Secretary concluded that this policy of forcing some asylum seekers on to planes to Rwanda will have a deterrent effect on people getting into boats to cross the channel?

Priti Patel: I alluded to that in my statement earlier. This is exactly what is required to break up the evil people-smuggling gangs. We are bringing in that deterrent effect, but I have been clear that there is no single solution. Frankly, those on the Opposition Benches can scream hysterically as much as they want, but they do not have a plan. They have supported for decades uncontrolled migration through whatever route. There is a degree of dishonesty now with the British public, at a time when we could come together to support the proposals, now that we have proposals in the Nationality and Borders Bill and a safe third country, which many called for in debates as the Bill went through this House and the other place. Now they just wring their hands and, typically, just oppose any option or solution that could make a difference.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): We can see from the level of questions coming from the Opposition, especially the Labour party, that they are completely out of touch with the British public. In the interests of safety, can the Home Secretary please confirm that if anybody does not want to go to Rwanda, they can claim asylum in France?

Priti Patel: France is a safe country.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The Home Secretary has been pressed several times on the question of who will and who will not be liable to be included in this scheme, and specifically whether it will include women and children. She has refused to say, despite having been asked by the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee and the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). If the Home Secretary knows how many people she believes will be included in the scheme over the coming months, surely she knows what the criteria will be. If so, is it not her duty to inform this House of them?

Priti Patel: I have made the point several times about those who are inadmissible to the asylum system, which is those who come to our country through illegal routes. We have made abundantly clear time and again that we are bringing in these reforms to stop that illegal trade in people smuggling, by creating safe and legal routes for women, children and families so that they do not have to be put in the hands of the evil people smugglers. As I have said, we will consider everyone for relocation through

the process I have outlined on a case-by-case basis, and no one will be sent to the third country if it is unsafe or inappropriate for them.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Asylum is sought by some of the world's most desperate people fleeing some of the most horrendous sorts of crimes, but sadly this process is abused by so many people traffickers exploiting the vulnerability of those people. What reassurance can my right hon. Friend give that she will continue to develop safe and legal routes for some of those people who have been left in refugee camps around the world for so many years?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend makes the most important point about safe and legal routes. As I announced in my statement, we have resettled over 180,000 people through safe and legal routes—more than any Government in recent years. Those routes include Syria, Afghanistan, Hong Kong and now Ukraine. We will continue to do exactly that. I have said in the House on a number of occasions that safe and legal routes should be bespoke because every single crisis is unique. It is right that we work with the right international partners to make sure that we provide safety and security for those fleeing persecution and oppression.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Home Secretary will know that Israel introduced a seemingly very similar scheme to this and then abandoned it. Can she tell us precisely why she believes that failed and why what she has put forward will succeed?

Priti Patel: I cannot comment on the schemes of other countries when they are not comparable to what the British Government are doing. This is a different scheme. It is a migration and economic development partnership. It is not comparable to those of other countries that the hon. Gentleman refers to.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): I know the Home Secretary has worked tirelessly with our European partners to try to stop vile people smugglers, but it is evident that more measures are urgently needed. Does she agree that a fair and just immigration and asylum policy should not rely on someone's ability to pay, nor on whether they are young enough or fit enough to attempt to jump the queue by making the journey, and that to oppose any measure to stop these people smugglers is immoral?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We see the scale of not just the global migration challenge but the level of criminality that has been associated with migration and illegal migration for decades. This is not a new phenomenon, as I have repeatedly said in the House many, many times. It is right that we absolutely go after the individuals who are responsible for this trade in people smuggling and stop these routes being viable. We cannot do this on our own. We have to work internationally with our partners in the EU, but other international partners as well, who want to step up and be part of the solution, and also to demonstrate to other countries around the world how we can resettle refugees in a good, proper way.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The permanent secretary at the Home Office concluded that he could not tell whether this was value for money, but on every number and every question of cost, the Home Secretary has failed to answer. Can she answer the point made by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May)? If this deters certain people from crossing, surely the people traffickers and smugglers will just load the dinghies up with women and children and make sure that they get their money somehow; it does not break the business model.

Priti Patel: I am sorry, but I want to dispute that point. It is our moral responsibility and duty not to just wring our hands and let the people-smugglers carry on trading in human misery. We have a responsibility to find solutions. It is disappointing, as I have repeatedly said, that the Opposition just sit on the sidelines carping and playing political games. The message to the British people is obviously that they just want uncontrolled immigration, they do not have a solution to this problem, and they are not prepared to work with the Government to stop this awful and evil trade of people smuggling.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Has the Home Secretary a plan to prevent potential emigrants from absconding before we can get them to Rwanda?

Priti Patel: It is an important point. Of course, there is a lot of work that takes place with immigration enforcement and our operational teams. I should just add that for those who go through the asylum process, as claims are processed in the United Kingdom, issues such as absconding will have an impact on how their asylum claim is viewed and treated.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I suspect that there are more asylum seekers housed in my constituency than in those of many who have been hectoring the Secretary of State this afternoon. I have heard their stories, and I know of the misery caused by people trafficking and of the desperation of those who hand over huge amounts of money and risk their lives to get into the United Kingdom. I therefore support the Secretary of State's aim to wreck this evil trade. However, if after a lengthy procedure only a very small percentage of those processed will have left the country, will not the people smugglers still be able to argue, "It's worth your while handing money over to us and risking your lives"?

Priti Patel: The right hon. Gentleman has made a number of points, and made them incredibly well, about the human misery. The way in which people's lives are put at risk is absolutely shocking and tragic. We want to stop that and break it, and we have to do so upstream. It is not good enough to wait for it to come to the shores of the United Kingdom or the coastline of France, because that is simply too late. That is why a whole array of work has been redoubled, working with intelligence and security partners upstream, and with different Governments, so that we can target, intercept and prosecute the gangs—not just in our country, but in other countries further upstream.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement and the new plan for immigration. Does she agree that there is nothing moral at all about a

[Henry Smith]

system that perpetuates evil people-smuggling and puts a disproportionate burden on constituencies such as mine with regard to temporarily housing migrants?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I come back to two points about the issue of criminal gangs and people smuggling. This is not a new phenomenon; it is well established. We have to work not only with our international partners to break the model and have the right level of prosecutions domestically, but with our counterparts on intelligence, intelligence sharing and prosecutions outside the United Kingdom. Much of that is in the new plan for immigration and the Nationality and Borders Bill, which Members on the Government side of the House support but Opposition Members do not. My hon. Friend is also absolutely right to say that it is unfair that a handful of local authorities across the United Kingdom—in England and Wales—have stood up to provide housing accommodation and meet the needs of asylum seekers. That is a shameful reflection on many other local authorities, but that will now be remedied through the dispersal policy.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I cannot accept that the Secretary of State believes that this policy is about protecting people, when we all know that it is utterly harmful. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York were right to speak out against the Government's unworkable plan to send asylum seekers and refugees to Rwanda. The Government's language criminalises vulnerable and traumatised people. The Archbishop of York was right to say that

"there is, in law, no such thing as an illegal asylum seeker. It is the people who exploit them that we need to crack down on".

This policy will also cost the UK taxpayer billions of pounds, as has happened in Australia—is that not correct?

Priti Patel: I hear the hon. Lady's case, but doing nothing is not an option when people are dying in the channel.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Following the previous question, does my right hon. Friend agree that the un-godly thing to do would be to do nothing and have a mass drowning of children in the channel this winter? Given that there is no end of people who want to cross the channel—however many we let in legally—is it not morally incumbent on those who oppose the policy to explain to the House how they will break the business model that once someone gets here, they are put in a hotel and never sent back?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Is it not a moral requirement for the Home Secretary to explain why she will deport people who have arrived in this country, fleeing from desperate wars, famine and problems, prepared to risk all to cross a dangerous sea? Do they not deserve a sense of humanity from the Home Secretary, and not to be deported to incarceration in Rwanda?

Priti Patel: Again, I refer to the tone in which the right hon. Gentleman refers to our partners in Rwanda, which frankly I think is quite questionable. I remind

him and all Members of the House that France, alongside many other EU member states, is a safe country, and those travelling to the United Kingdom by making illegal and dangerous crossings that put their lives at risk, which is what we are trying to stop, could and should claim asylum in those countries first of all.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I welcome much of what has been said today, but given that three quarters of child asylum seekers who come to the UK are boys aged 16 or 17, what assurance can my right hon. Friend give me that the age assessment process will be fully completed before they become eligible for removal from the United Kingdom?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his very sensible question. The House will be very well aware of the new age assessment work that will come forward under the Nationality and Borders Bill. This is an important piece of work that will help to ensure greater efficacy in the asylum system and support local authorities in determining the age of young people claiming asylum. For too long we have had some of the most egregious abuses, whereby young men have masqueraded as children and posed a safeguarding threat in our schools and social services. This is important and serious work that is taking place right now, and that will provide everyone with assurance about the age of those youngsters coming to our country and claiming asylum.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary has been repeatedly asked this afternoon about the costs of this totally wrong policy. She said that she knew the costs involved in chartering aircraft from examples of our existing removals scheme, so can she tell us today what the cost will be of chartering one return flight to Rwanda and what the cost will be per person deported? Will she admit that this policy will cost far in excess of the £120 million that she said was just for development costs?

Priti Patel: First of all, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely wrong. As for the costs of removing individuals, for the record, it is worth reflecting upon the number of Opposition Members who frequently write to me to stop the removal of individuals with no legal basis to be in the country when we are chartering planes to remove failed asylum seekers and foreign national offenders. Those costs are marginal compared with the long-term cost of housing people with no legal basis to be in this country and the wider cost to society, through our public services, healthcare, and housing and wider accommodation.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend on the proposals she has announced today, which offer the real prospect of breaking the business model of the people smugglers? Is it not the case that if anyone should be coming in for criticism, whether from this side of the Thames or the other, it should be those who are plying that disgusting trade and not those who are seeking to disrupt it?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and this should be a moment of reflection for all colleagues, when it comes to those who thwart the removal of those with no legal basis to be in the country, on the

cost to the public purse and hard-pressed British taxpayers of not removing those individuals from the country in the first place.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Global Britain used to be a byword for bad trade deals; now it is an excuse to outsource our asylum system to Rwanda. Of course, we all stand, do we not, with the people of Ukraine in their fight to repel one dictator, but the Home Secretary is yoking the UK's reputation to another. The Welsh and Scottish Governments have long asked for talks on a solution and on the establishment of safe routes for refugees. Did she engage with those two Governments, or does she only talk with dictators?

Priti Patel: If I may say so, I think the right hon. Lady will be very well aware of the engagement that has taken place in Government on our safe and legal route for Ukrainian nationals coming over to the United Kingdom, and those discussions have taken place across the devolved Administrations. I should also say for the record that the number of people who have come to our country through safe and legal routes stands at over 180,000 right now. Global Britain is doing more than its fair share in the world, and we are leading the world when it comes to safe and legal routes. Finally, I conclude by saying that, when it comes to safe and legal routes, it is those from the right hon. Lady's party and every party on the Opposition Benches who have voted against the Nationality and Borders Bill, which actually puts safe and legal routes into statute.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend has highlighted the opening of a reception centre at the former RAF base at Linton-on-Ouse, located between Harrogate and York. Can she give us a bit more information about that—for example, when might it open, what is its capacity and how many local jobs will be created?

Priti Patel: I can confirm that the centre will be opening in the next six weeks. Work has been undertaken for several months on the development of the site, including capacity at the site and all the various measures required for the housing and accommodation for asylum seekers.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Between 2015 and 2020, the number of asylum applications decided early stayed constant at about 30,000, but the proportion decided within the Secretary of State's six-month target plummeted from 80% to 17%, despite doubling the number of caseworkers. Is it not the truth that her asylum processing system is broken—sending refugees to Rwanda will not fix that—and that she is using those fleeing from the worst atrocities of war as a shield for her incompetence?

Priti Patel: The asylum system is completely broken. That is the only fact that the hon. Lady is correct on. I am changing the asylum system, as per the Nationality and Borders Bill, which the hon. Lady has voted against and every Opposition Member has voted against. This includes turning around asylum decision making in a faster way with digitalisation of the process, and also making sure that the immigration courts and tribunals hear more cases in a faster time, which is a point I made

to a colleague in the House earlier. It is important that all these aspects of the reformed asylum system come together—

Chi Onwurah indicated dissent.

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady may shake her head, but she shakes her head because, quite frankly, she is opposed to any reform or any controls on illegal migration and immigration.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Ever since this policy was announced over the bank holiday weekend, we have heard some very strong rhetoric from the Opposition parties, leaning into some very lazy tropes about Africa and dripping with European exceptionalism. Can I ask my right hon. Friend whether she agrees with me in condemning that kind of language when talking about Rwanda, and can I advise her to keep on this course, because when I was talking to my constituents over the weekend, the one phrase everyone was using was “not before time”?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, and I refer to some of the undercurrents of the tone that has been used—not just in this House today, but more broadly—about our partnership with Rwanda. I could go so far as to say that some of this is quite xenophobic and, quite frankly, I think it is deeply egregious. Rwanda is one of the fastest growing countries in Africa, and we have an incredible partnership with it. Rwanda will be the host of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting later this year, and it is leading the way on the international stage on many international issues. I actually think this is pretty distasteful, and it says a great deal about Opposition Members' understanding of global Britain and internationalism.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Recently my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) joined many others throughout this statement in asking for evidence that this policy could possibly work in some way or another. In each case the right hon. Lady has declined to provide that evidence, so will she put in the Library of the House of Commons all the internal Government advice she has received on the legality, workability and cost of the scheme? That way, at least we will be able to assess what the evidence-base is.

Priti Patel: I refer to the comments I made earlier on the legal and legislative basis, which was all put in place under the previous Labour Government. Indeed, this scheme and proposal were also looked at under the previous Labour Government, and had it been operational back then we might not be having this debate today as more people would be claiming asylum in safe countries in the EU and the people-smuggling gangs would have been broken up.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and believe that the policy will work. Will my right hon. Friend explain what the successful implementation of her policy will look like on the ground, and in particular what impact she believes it will have on the number of vulnerable people willing to put their lives in the hands of ruthless people traffickers to gain illegal entry to our country?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes an important point. One answer will be in the policy working and the removal of people to Rwanda. It will also be in overcoming many of the obstacles and hurdles, some of which colleagues have touched on this afternoon, including the legal and other barriers we face in removing those with no legal basis to be in the United Kingdom. The other point to make is that the long-term impact has to be to start disrupting the business model of the people smugglers by breaking up the evil people-smuggling gangs and going after them with more prosecutions, making sure the pilots of those small boats are prosecuted in the way I explained earlier in my statement. That not only takes a whole-of-Government approach, but also means we have to work with our international partners across Europe and further afield.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituents want none of this despicable plan. As the chair of the all-party group on immigration detention I went to Napier barracks. It is not fit for purpose: it is cold, bleak and lacking in dignity and privacy. Vulnerable people struggle to get medical, social and legal support but at least we could visit. Can the Home Secretary tell me how facilities in Rwanda will be scrutinised, particularly given that Human Rights Watch says of Rwanda:

“Arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and torture in official and unofficial detention facilities is commonplace”?

Priti Patel: I would be delighted to tell the hon. Lady how accommodation facilities in Kigali in Rwanda will be scrutinised. That is part of the monitoring work the Home Office and technical officials have established and is part of the memorandum of understanding—as if she has read the details in the MOU. Secondly, the hon. Lady’s characterisation of Napier is grossly wrong.

Alison Thewliss: I have been there.

Priti Patel: As we have as well. The hon. Lady will also be aware of the facilities that have been put in place—all the recreation, leisure, legal and accommodation facilities that UK taxpayers are paying for, the costs of which are going up and up and up.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Does the Home Secretary agree that no one would spend thousands of pounds to go to one country and end up in another and that this policy will be a deterrent, which will save lives and save the taxpayer money?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is a voice of common sense on this, primarily because we want that deterrent effect—there is no doubt about that—and in addition we want to go after the individuals who have been profiteering for decades and decades from the human misery of people smuggling.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Given that many Rwandans seek and are granted asylum here in the UK, how can the Home Secretary possibly tell the House with a straight face that Rwanda is a safe country to send people seeking asylum to?

Priti Patel: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the comments I made earlier on Rwanda: Rwanda is a safe country and I think his tone on Rwanda as a country and our

partnership is unjustifiable and insulting. I will leave my remarks there, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It seems to me that some actively celebrate the porosity of the French border. That weakness has seen 28,000 irregular crossings, a huge number of appalling deaths and a trade that is bigger than the drugs trade. Contrast that with my right hon. Friend’s new policy, which will normalise proper immigration rules, taking people to safe countries for proper processing in the right way. Can she understand my confusion that people are not celebrating this new policy?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his support and his comments. As I said earlier, I think the Opposition should just be honest about their position. They clearly stand for open borders; they do not believe in controlled immigration. We have a points-based immigration system that provides legal routes for people to come to the United Kingdom. They do not want the differentiation between legal and illegal routes, but I will tell you who does, Madam Deputy Speaker—the British people.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When somebody is trafficked or smuggled into the UK, and then determines that they do not want to be deported to Rwanda, what steps will she take to uphold their rights under the Refugee Convention?

Priti Patel: As I said earlier, there is a difference between trafficking cases and those who have been smuggled through the people smuggling routes. When it comes to cases of trafficking, we have all the legal bases to provide support and to go after the traffickers for the abuses that they have committed. The hon. Lady will be very familiar with all of that. Not only that, I say again that every case is determined case by case. That means the right kind of legal support, both in this country and in Rwanda.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): People smuggling does not start at Calais; it can go through five different countries before people get to Calais. Then we have the abhorrence of people drowning in the Channel. I understand the concerns of the House about sending people to Rwanda, but we have one champion in the House who sadly is not in his place at this moment in time. When he was the shadow Secretary of State for International Development and became the Secretary of State for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) had a lot to do with Rwanda and he has the utmost respect from their Government. Will my right hon. Friend utilise his talents and use him in some ambassadorial way to allay the fears of Members of this House?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes some very important points, particularly about the country of Rwanda. Those of us in this House who know Rwanda well—I put that in the context of some of the ignorance that has been shown today—and know about the incredible work of the Rwandan Government through difficult times more recently, know how they have become almost Africa’s voice on the international stage.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): May I challenge this lazy and probably sexist assumption that all young men are economic migrants? Does the Home Secretary not understand that in conflict situations—especially civil wars, whether in Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Ethiopia or Sudan—one side will come to a town or village and either press gang all the young men to fight for them or kill them and then the other side will come and do exactly the same? These young men are not economic migrants but people trying to flee a war they want nothing to do with.

Priti Patel: That is exactly why we are proposing safe and legal routes, as we have done with Syria and Afghanistan. These are bespoke routes that help those fleeing persecution. There is an important point that the hon. Gentleman has made in there, which is also why our case-by-case approach and assessment when it comes to those seeking asylum is absolutely applied in the right kind of way. The new plan for immigration and the Nationality and Borders Bill are trying to do exactly that by bringing efficacy to our asylum system to make sure that we can help those in genuine need.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The EU uses Rwanda for refugee settlement. The United Nations uses Rwanda for refugee settlement. Even the Labour Government legislated to use safe third countries to process asylum claims. Given this, does my right hon. Friend agree that exactly the same approach lies behind this partnership with Rwanda?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It goes without saying that it seems to be fine, depending on your political persuasion, to say it is fine for the EU, it is fine for the UN, but it is not fine for the British Government. That is simply not acceptable. This has worked in the past. I come back to the fundamental principle that doing nothing is not an option while people are drowning not just in the channel but in the Mediterranean. People are taking dangerous journeys, often through Libya, making difficult and dangerous crossings across the Mediterranean and then across the channel. That is what we want to stop and we have a moral duty to do everything we possibly can to break up that model.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): We know that two-thirds of migrants arriving by dangerous routes have a legitimate claim for asylum. On the remainder, can the Home Secretary please tell us what new agreement she has struck with the top five countries of origin for economic migrants in respect of returning migrants, improving visa application processes and tackling people smuggling at source?

Priti Patel: Well, of course, tackling people smugglers at source is exactly what our country and Government are leading on right now. We are leading on that work with our intelligence and security partners, and through law enforcement co-operation. We are doing that through our EU near-neighbours such as France, Belgium and the Netherlands, but also countries further upstream, including Italy and Greece. It is right that we do that. This is difficult, difficult work and we are supporting them. My final comments very much come back to the hon. Lady's question, but also to points made by others.

Speeding up processes is exactly what the Nationality and Borders Bill is about: making sure we can speed up asylum claims and stop the merry-go-round of going to the courts and tribunal again and again and again, and ensuring we can bring efficacy to the asylum system.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I very much welcome measures that will offer a proper deterrent to those who are seeking to come to this country illegally. I also particularly welcome action to ensure that people are dispersed more fairly right across the country. Does my right hon. Friend agree that for far too long areas like Stoke-on-Trent have taken far more than their fair share and that it is about time other parts of the country did their part?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I pay tribute to Stoke Council and to all parliamentary colleagues from Stoke-on-Trent who have made representations over a long period of time many, many times with great strength and feeling. The dispersal policy is important. I have touched on it already. It is a complete and utter shame that the nationalists have been howling about this policy, while at the same time only one local authority has actually supported the dispersal policy. In the principle of fairness and a sense of fairness across the country, and to British taxpayers, we must make sure that every local authority participates in the scheme.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Can I try to get a clear answer to the question that others have asked? The Home Office factsheet on this proposal explains:

“Every person who comes to the UK illegally, or by dangerous or unnecessary methods...will be considered for relocation to Rwanda.”

The Home Secretary seemed to confirm that in her earlier comments. Will she confirm now that women and children who come to the UK through irregular routes fleeing conflict and repression will be eligible for transfer to Rwanda, and not just the adult men, as her Department briefed the media?

Priti Patel: I will repeat what I said earlier on. Decisions will be taken on a case-by-case basis and nobody will be removed if it is unsafe or inappropriate for them.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): May I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on this fantastic policy which people overwhelmingly supported when they voted for Brexit in 2016 and when they overwhelmingly voted for the Conservative party in Stoke-on-Trent for the first time across the board? Does she agree with me that it is about time that other local authorities did their bit, particularly in Scotland, and that the north Islington wokerati are more than welcome to come to Stoke-on-Trent and explain why they oppose it? Perhaps they should send the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) to explain why.

Priti Patel: I think it is fair to say that my hon. Friend has made a very powerful and compelling case for the dispersal policy, but equally for why doing nothing is no longer an issue when it comes to reform of the asylum system and to dealing with how we remove individuals

[Priti Patel]

with no legal basis to be in the UK, particularly those who have travelled to the United Kingdom illegally through dangerous crossings from safe European countries.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I agree with the right hon. Member that our asylum system is broken and that the £5 million cost is too much. This includes the people who are staying in hotels in my constituency on South Lambeth Road—the many people I am trying to help with their asylum claims. So many people in Vauxhall have contacted me because they are worried about this policy. The FCDO website states that Rwanda is not a safe place and that it is frowned on for people to be LGBT. There are many LGBT people who claim asylum. Can the Home Secretary guarantee that those people will still be safe and not sent to a country where they could be at harm?

Priti Patel: Absolutely—we can—and that was part of our negotiation with the Rwandan Government. It has been made very clear in the legal agreement that we have between us.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the crucial point is that the partnership with Rwanda is for people attempting to come to the UK illegally? Has she been struck, as I have, that despite the complaints, the carping and sometimes the caterwauling from Opposition Members, when it comes to proposing an alternative—a thought-through, responsible plan—their silence is deafening?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will repeat what I said earlier: this is the same party opposite that writes letters to me frequently to stop us removing people with no legal basis to be in the UK, including many foreign national offenders—rapists, murderers, paedophiles, you name it—along with asylum seekers. That speaks volumes—it really does—when it comes to protecting our country and protecting British citizens.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Like me, the Home Secretary is the daughter of east African Indian immigrants whose family sought sanctuary and a better life in this country, so does she not feel, as I do, a personal moral responsibility to extend the generosity that was shown by the British Government to our communities in the '60s and '70s by providing further safe and legal routes to the UK for refugees, rather than shipping them off to Rwanda?

Priti Patel: When it comes to safe and legal routes, I hope that the hon. Lady will vote with the Government on the Nationality and Borders Bill, because that is exactly what this Government are proposing. As I said, 180,000 people have been brought to the United Kingdom under safe and legal routes and this Government are committed to doing much, much more.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. That concludes this statement. I am sorry that some Members did not get in, but I am sure that we have a list of names so that we may look to them in future.

Easter Recess: Government Update

5.2 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the Government's response to events at home and abroad during the Easter recess.

I will come to Ukraine in a moment, since I have just left a virtual meeting with President Biden, President Macron, Chancellor Scholz and eight other world leaders, but let me begin in all humility by saying that on 12 April, I received a fixed penalty notice relating to an event in Downing Street on 19 June 2020. I paid the fine immediately and I offered the British people a full apology, and I take this opportunity, on the first available sitting day, to repeat my wholehearted apology to the House. As soon as I received the notice, I acknowledged the hurt and the anger, and I said that people had a right to expect better of their Prime Minister, and I repeat that again in the House now.

Let me also say—not by way of mitigation or excuse, but purely because it explains my previous words in this House—that it did not occur to me, then or subsequently, that a gathering in the Cabinet Room just before a vital meeting on covid strategy could amount to a breach of the rules. I repeat: that was my mistake and I apologise for it unreservedly. I respect the outcome of the police's investigation, which is still under way. I can only say that I will respect their decision making and always take the appropriate steps. As the House will know, I have already taken significant steps to change the way things work in No. 10.

It is precisely because I know that so many people are angry and disappointed that I feel an even greater sense of obligation to deliver on the priorities of the British people and to respond in the best traditions of our country to Putin's barbaric onslaught against Ukraine. Our Ukrainian friends are fighting for the life of their nation, and they achieved the greatest feat of arms of the 21st century by repelling the Russian assault on Kyiv. The whole House will share my admiration for their heroism and courage.

Putin arrogantly assumed that he would capture Kyiv in a matter of days, and now the blackened carcasses of his tanks and heavy armour litter the approaches to the capital on both banks of the Dnieper and are smouldering monuments to his failure. Having pulverised the invader's armoured spearheads, the Ukrainians then counter-attacked. By 6 April, Putin had been compelled to withdraw his forces from the entire Kyiv region. Britain and our allies supplied some of the weaponry, but it was Ukrainian valour and sacrifice that saved their capital.

I travelled to Kyiv myself on 9 April—the first G7 leader to visit since the invasion—and I spent four hours with President Volodymyr Zelensky, the indomitable leader of a nation fighting for survival, who gives the roar of a lion-hearted people. I assured him of the implacable resolve of the United Kingdom, shared across this House, to join with our allies and give his brave people the weapons that they need to defend themselves. When the President and I went for an impromptu walk through central Kyiv, we happened upon a man who immediately expressed his love for Britain and the British people. He was generous enough to say—quite unprompted, I should reassure the House—"I will tell my children and grandchildren they must always remember that Britain helped us."

But the urgency is even greater now because Putin has regrouped his forces and launched a new offensive in the Donbas. We knew that this danger would come. When I welcomed President Duda of Poland to Downing Street on 7 April and Chancellor Scholz the following day, we discussed exactly how we could provide the arms that Ukraine would desperately need to counter Putin's next onslaught. On 12 April, I spoke to President Biden to brief him on my visit to Kyiv and how we will intensify our support for President Zelensky. I proposed that our long-term goal must be to strengthen and fortify Ukraine to the point where Russia will never dare to invade again.

Just as our foreign policy must look to the long term, the same is true of this Government's domestic priorities. As we face the economic aftershocks of covid and the consequences of Russian aggression, that is above all about tackling the impact on British energy prices, on consumers and on family bills. That is why we are spending over £9 billion to help families struggling with their bills and we are helping families to insulate their homes and reduce costs. To end our dependence on Putin's oil and gas and to ensure that energy is cheaper in the long term, we published on 7 April a new strategy to make British energy greener, more affordable and more secure. We will massively expand offshore wind and—in the country that split the atom—we will build a new reactor not every decade, but every year.

This Government are joining with our allies to face down Putin's aggression abroad while addressing the toughest problems at home, helping millions of families with the cost of living, making our streets safer and funding the NHS to clear the covid backlog. My job is to work every day to make the British people safer, more secure and more prosperous, and that is what I will continue to do. I commend this statement to the House.

5.9 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): What a joke!

Even now, as the latest mealy-mouthed apology stumbles out of one side of the Prime Minister's mouth, a new set of deflections and distortions pours from the other. But the damage is already done. The public have made up their minds. They do not believe a word that the Prime Minister says. They know what he is.

As ever with this Prime Minister, those close to him find themselves ruined and the institutions that he vows to protect damaged: good Ministers forced to walk away from public service; the Chancellor's career up in flames; the leader of the Scottish Conservatives rendered pathetic. Let me say to all those unfamiliar with this Prime Minister's career that this is not some fixable glitch in the system; it is the whole point. It is what he does. It is who he is. He knows he is dishonest and incapable of changing, so he drags everybody else down with him. *[Interruption.]* The more people debate themselves, parroting—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I cannot hear what is being said because there is so much noise. *[Interruption.]* Mr Fabricant, I am all right.

Hon. Members: Withdraw!

Mr Speaker: Order. What I will say is that I think the Leader of the Opposition used the word "dishonest", and I do not consider that appropriate. **[HON. MEMBERS:**

"Breaking the rules!"] We do not want to talk about breaking rules, do we? I do not think this is a good time to discuss that.

I am sure that if the Leader of the Opposition withdraws that word and works around it, he will be able—given the knowledge he has gained over many, many years—to use appropriate words that are in keeping with the good, temperate language of this House.

Keir Starmer: I respect that ruling from the Chair, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister knows what he is. As I was saying, he drags everyone else down with him. The more people debate themselves, parroting his absurd defences, the more the public will believe that all politicians are the same, all as bad as each other—and that suits this Prime Minister just fine.

Some Conservative Members seem oblivious to the Prime Minister's game. Some know what he is up to but are too weak to act, while others are gleefully playing the part that the Prime Minister cast for them. A Minister said on the radio this morning, "It is the same as a speeding ticket." No, it is not. No one has ever broken down in tears because they could not drive faster than 20 miles an hour outside a school. Do not insult the public with this nonsense!

As it happens, however, the last Minister who got a speeding ticket, and then lied about it, ended up in prison. I know, because I prosecuted him.

Last week, we were treated to a grotesque spectacle: one of the Prime Minister's loyal supporters accusing teachers and nurses of drinking in the staff room during lockdown. Conservative Members can associate themselves with that if they want, but those of us who take pride in our NHS workers, our teachers, and every other key worker who got us through those dark days will never forget their contempt.

Plenty of people did not agree with every rule that the Prime Minister wrote, but they followed them none the less, because in this country we respect others. We put the greater good above narrow self-interest, and we understand that the rules apply to all of us. This morning I spoke to John Robinson, a constituent of the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), and I want to tell the House his story.

When his wife died of covid, John and his family obeyed the Prime Minister's rules. He did not see her in hospital; he did not hold her hand as she died. Their daughters and grandchildren drove 100 miles up the motorway, clutching a letter from the funeral director in case they were questioned by the police. They did not have a service in church, and John's son-in-law stayed away because he would have been the forbidden seventh mourner. Does the Prime Minister not realise that John would have given the world to hold his dying wife's hand, even if it was just for nine minutes? But he did not, because he followed the Prime Minister's rules—rules that we now know the Prime Minister blithely, repeatedly and deliberately ignored. After months of insulting excuses, today's half-hearted apology will never be enough for John Robinson. If the Prime Minister had any respect for John, and the millions like him who sacrificed everything to follow the rules, he would resign. But he will not, because he does not respect John, and he does not respect the sacrifice of the British public. He is a man without shame.

[Keir Starmer]

Looking past the hon. Member for Lichfield and the nodding dogs in the Cabinet, there are many decent hon. Members on the Conservative Benches who do respect John Robinson and do respect the British public. They know the damage that the Prime Minister is doing; they know that things cannot go on as they are; and they know that it is their responsibility to bring an end to this shameful chapter. Today I urge them once again not to follow in the slipstream of an out-of-touch, out-of-control Prime Minister. I urge them to put their conscience, their country and John Robinson first; to remove the Prime Minister from office; to bring decency, honesty and integrity back into our politics; and to stop the denigration of everything that this country stands for.

The Prime Minister: I apologise once again, profusely, to John Robinson, to all of those who lost loved ones, and particularly to those who suffered during the pandemic. In my statement, I have tried to explain why I spoke to the House as I did. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has chosen to respond with a series of personal attacks on me, and I understand why he does that. I understand that, but I think it would have been a good thing if, in the course of his remarks, he had addressed some of the issues that I mentioned, not least the crisis in Ukraine, with the impact that that is having on the livelihoods of everybody in this country. In order to address that, the Government will get on with our job, which is to focus on the needs of the British people.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about nodding dogs. I remind the House that there was a certain nodding dog, who sat nodding in the previous Labour shadow Cabinet, who would happily have installed the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), and made a disastrous mistake for the security of our country at a very difficult time. This Government will get on with the difficult job of taking us through the aftershocks of the covid pandemic, and of leading not just this country but the world in our response to the violence that we are seeing in Ukraine. I renew my apologies. I renew my apologies to John Robinson and to families up and down the land, but I think the best thing that we can do now for this country, as politicians, is not to indulge in personal abuse of the kind we have heard, but to get on with our jobs.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I have heard the remarks of both my right hon. Friend and the Leader of the Opposition, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend appreciates that it is crystal clear that a fixed penalty notice, such as was applied in his case, is a civil penalty fine, which, if paid within 28 days, eliminates the possibility of future prosecution in the criminal courts and, furthermore, can be paid without any admission of guilt. The judgment in a recent Court of Appeal criminal case said that if the payment is made within 28 days, a fixed penalty notice is held not to be a conviction, as the defendant is

“not admitting any offence, not admitting any criminality, and would not have any stain imputed to his character.”

That is the perspective on this case.

The Prime Minister: I make it absolutely clear that in no way do I minimise the importance of this fine. I am heartily sorry for my mistake, and I accept completely the decision of the police.

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

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Let us remind ourselves that, on 8 December 2021, the Prime Minister denied that any parties happened at No. 10 Downing Street—the very same parties that the police have now fined him for attending. People know by now that the rules of this House prevent me from saying that he deliberately and wilfully misled the House, but maybe today that matters little, because the public have already made up their mind.

YouGov polling shows that 75% of the British public, and 82% of people in Scotland, have made up their mind on the Prime Minister. The public know the difference between the truth and lying, and they know that the Prime Minister is apologising for one reason, and one reason only, and it is the only reason he ever apologises: because he has been caught. After months of denials, his excuses have finally run out of road, and so must his time in office. The Prime Minister has broken the very laws he wrote. His trying to argue that he did not know that he had broken his own laws would be laughable if it were not so serious. Prime Minister, you cannot hide behind advisers. He knows, we know and the dogs in the street know that the Prime Minister has broken the law. This is the first Prime Minister to be officially found to have broken the law in office—a lawbreaking Prime Minister. Just dwell on that: a Prime Minister who has broken the law and who remains under investigation for additional lawbreaking—not just a lawbreaker but a serial offender. If he has any decency, any dignity, he would not just apologise but resign.

The scale and the seriousness of the issues we all now face demand effective leadership from a Prime Minister who can be trusted. The Tory cost of living crisis and the war crimes being inflicted on the Ukrainian people need our full focus. In a time of crisis, the very least the public deserve is a Prime Minister they can trust to tell the truth. For this Prime Minister, that trust is broken and can never be fixed. The truth is that a majority of people across these islands will never against trust a single word he says.

The questions today are not so much for a Prime Minister desperately clinging on to power. The real question is for Tory Back Benchers: will they finally grow a spine and remove this person from office? Or is the Tory strategy about standing behind a Prime Minister whom the public cannot trust with the truth?

The Prime Minister: I direct the right hon. Gentleman to what I said earlier, when I apologised profusely for my mistake and for what I got wrong. I repeat that.

The right hon. Gentleman asks whether this Government are capable of providing effective leadership, during the current crisis, in standing up to Russia, and I remind him that it is still the policy of the Scottish National party to dispense with this country's independent nuclear deterrent at a particularly crucial time. I do not think that is what this country needs right now.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Many of my constituents are angry about breaches that happened two years ago, and I welcome the Prime Minister's recognition of that and his apology, but does he agree that we face the gravest crisis in our global security for a long time, and it is essential that we remain focused on

beating Putin and stopping the aggression against Ukraine? Can he say what additional measures we can take for Ukraine, following his discussion with President Biden and others, to ensure that Putin's aggression is not allowed to succeed?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend, and I repeat my apology and my contrition, but I want to say that the war in Ukraine is at a very perilous stage, and it is vital that we do not allow Putin to gain momentum in the Donbas, as he well could, and in the east. That is why we are stepping up our supply of military hardware, of a kind that I think the Ukrainians particularly need now. This will become an artillery conflict, and they need support with more artillery. That is what we will be giving them, in addition to many other forms of support.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I see that the Prime Minister is anxious to move on to other issues, but the question is: can he do that? Let me take one example. Can he explain to me, the House and the country how he can credibly justify calling for the resignation of the boss of P&O Ferries when he faced allegations that he broke the law, while refusing to resign when he himself is guilty of actually the breaking the law that he set?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady very much, and I think that what P&O Ferries did was entirely wrong, as I have told the House before. I made a serious mistake, and I apologise for it very sincerely.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I strongly support the Government's actions in standing up to Putin's aggression, and helping Ukraine defend itself and our values. It is exactly at times such as this that our country needs a Prime Minister who exemplifies those values. I regret to say that we have a Prime Minister who broke the laws that he told the country it had to follow, who has not been straightforward about it, and who is now going to ask the decent men and women on the Conservative Benches to defend what I think is indefensible. I am very sorry to have to say this, but I no longer think he is worthy of the great office he holds.

The Prime Minister: I must say to my right hon. Friend that I know the care and sincerity with which he weighs his words, and I bitterly regret what has happened and the event in Downing Street, as I have said, but I do believe it is the job of this Government to get on with the priorities of the British people, and that is what we are going to do.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): A poll over the weekend asked 2,000 people what they think of the Prime Minister. The most common word they used, by far, was "liar". Does the Prime Minister understand how profoundly damaging it is to our great country to have a Government led by a man the public no longer trust and no longer have confidence in? If the Prime Minister will not resign, will he at least give Conservative MPs a free vote on Thursday, so that they can decide for themselves whether the Prime Minister deliberately misled Parliament, or was just so incompetent that he did not even understand his own laws?

The Prime Minister: I repeat what I have said earlier. I disagree profoundly with what the right hon. Gentleman has just said, but I repeat my apology to the House and to the country.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): The people of Rossendale and Darwen will have weighed the words of the Prime Minister carefully today and will, like me, feel that it is a contrite and wholehearted apology. They will also be looking at the action of the Prime Minister in Ukraine. Will he consider putting Britain at the forefront of a new Marshall plan to rebuild Ukraine after Putin has been defeated, and fund this, in part, from the assets that the British state has confiscated from Russian oligarchs?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his excellent suggestion, which is one that the UK Government are already pursuing. In my conversations with President Zelensky, we discussed exactly how the supporters and friends of Ukraine around the world can help to rebuild that beautiful country when the conflict is over.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): We have always known that the Prime Minister was only ever sorry because he was caught bang to rights. This latest spin about the Met having it wrong is designed to bully the Met and provide cover to his Back Benchers who do not have the bottle to sack him, but the country has already concluded that he is either a liar or an idiot—

Mr Speaker: Order. I said we want temperate language. We have the motion on Thursday. That is a different matter. For today, we are not using language like that.

Karl Turner: I withdraw the word "liar", Mr Speaker, but the electorate will have already decided. Everybody knows that the Prime Minister is a lawbreaker. If the Met has got the wrong end of the stick, why does he not challenge the penalties before the criminal courts and have his day in court?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much. I repeat what I said in my statement earlier, which is that I fully respect the decision of the police.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend have the power to authorise Sue Gray to publish her report in full? If so, will he use that power to put an end to this matter, so that we do not get diverted—as we are being—from such crucial questions as the supply of armaments to Ukrainian democrats?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend very much, but I think it very important that the Met should conclude its investigation before Sue Gray's final report.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Today marks the Prime Minister's 1,000th day in office, but it takes a particular type of Prime Minister to rack up as many catastrophic failures, scandals and U-turns as days on the job—from the Tory-made cost of living crisis to dodgy covid contracts for his cronies, unlawfully proroguing

[Anna McMorris]

Parliament and now breaking the law. Enough is enough. So will the Prime Minister confirm whether this 1,000th day will be his last?

The Prime Minister: I might add to the hon. Lady's list fixing social care when Labour did absolutely nothing, rolling out the fastest vaccine programme anywhere in Europe and thereby accomplishing the fastest economic growth in the G7, and leading the world in standing up to Putin.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I appreciate the Prime Minister coming here today and taking full responsibility and apologising. It is clear that President Zelensky has repeatedly identified the Prime Minister as Ukraine's greatest ally. He has also been identified, I think, by President Putin as enemy No. 1. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is not a bad accolade to have? Does he also agree that months of psychodrama in this place will play into the hands of the latter, not the former?

The Prime Minister: It is very important that the people in this country should understand that, although the country is faced with massive issues that we have to deal with, in the aftershocks of covid and the war in Ukraine, I in no way minimise the importance of the fine I have received and I apologise wholeheartedly.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): People across the House will agree that the situation in Ukraine is serious, and there is no doubt that we fully support what we are trying to do. However, setting that aside for a minute, the Prime Minister stands before us today as the first resident of No. 10 to be found guilty of breaking the law while serving in public office. While he has finally apologised today, it has been accompanied by the absurd caveat that the man who set the rules could not understand them. Will the Prime Minister concede that remaining in office deals a grievous blow to the rule of law in this country and, for the first time in his career, will he put the national interest before his personal ambition and resign?

The Prime Minister: I repeat my apology and direct the hon. Gentleman to what I said earlier. The people of this country need us to focus on their issues and their priorities, and that is what the Government are going to do.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his update on the energy security strategy, in particular the support offered for steel. It is the latest in a long line of support that he has brought forward, and it also sets out plans for wind, solar and nuclear. Does he agree that the best possible place to make the steel needed for those projects is right here in the UK?

The Prime Minister: Yes, my hon. Friend is completely right. That is why our energy security strategy is vital not just for consumers, but for British industry.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): A new poll shows that three quarters of the public think the Prime Minister deliberately lied about breaking lockdown rules, yet on

Thursday the Prime Minister will order his MPs to stop his lawbreaking ever coming before the Privileges Committee. If the Prime Minister has nothing to hide, why not do the straightforward thing and refer himself to the Privileges Committee? What is he scared of?

The Prime Minister: The House will decide.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for coming to the House at the earliest opportunity to update us on the situation. Following your announcement, Mr Speaker, this House will have to decide on Thursday whether to refer the Prime Minister to the Privileges Committee. There is only one issue—whether the Prime Minister deliberately misled the House—so I ask him: did you deliberately mislead the House at the Dispatch Box?

The Prime Minister: No.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Prime Minister, millions of angry people across the United Kingdom will remain angry, even after today's apology, because of what they have gone through, but any objective listener will recognise that, for whatever reason, the apology was genuine. And I remind the Prime Minister that hundreds of thousands of Unionists in Northern Ireland are angry about other things as well. However, it is important to focus on the future, rather than the past.

The Prime Minister said that he discussed the situation in Ukraine with world leaders today. That situation is becoming desperate. What discussions has he had about giving Ukrainian forces the appropriate weaponry so that they can drive back the Russians, liberate their country and avoid all the consequences for our economy, oil, and food for the rest of the world?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the UK is in continual discussion with the Ukrainians about what we can do to help them to defend themselves. A lot has gone there, a lot more will be going, and I pay tribute to a particular Northern Ireland business—Short Brothers, which is now Thales—that has been absolutely indispensable in helping the Ukrainians against Russian armour.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Government and the British people have provided extensive support to Ukrainian refugees, but around 200 British Council contractors remain in Afghanistan, many of whom are fleeing the Taliban. I am awaiting a meeting with the Refugees Minister that was promised back in November, so will the Prime Minister use his good offices to speed that meeting along?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course. Those 200 contractors for the British Council should, I believe, automatically be eligible and certainly should be able to come under the scheme we have put in place, but I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets the meeting he wants.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Russia, I found it difficult this Easter to have any faith, seeing the barbarity meted out to the people of Ukraine: women tortured and raped, their children tortured and raped, and their menfolk, in

many cases, with hands tied and then shot in the back of the head. All those things we know to be war crimes, but many of the worst atrocities are being committed by sociopaths working as mercenaries—paid for by the Russian Government and the Russian state, but none the less working as mercenaries. The UK still is not a signatory to the convention on mercenaries. Is it not time we put a stop to this terrible barbarity, not just in Ukraine, but in other places in the world where mercenaries from the Wagner Group operate with sociopathic intent?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much. I will study his proposal on mercenaries. He has been right for a long time on Russia, and he has been vindicated.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I have heard the fulsome apology by the Prime Minister, but he is taking a lead in Ukraine and I suggest he needs to keep giving Ukraine defensive weapons so that we can eventually drag President Putin and the Russian Federation to a peace agreement. Will he then lead the world in gaining reparations so that the great country of Ukraine can be rebuilt?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his staunch position on Ukraine. He is completely right. I am afraid there is now no easy way to find a diplomatic or negotiated solution; I know the House would have preferred that, but it will be difficult to construct an off-ramp for Vladimir Putin. We are now in a logic where we must simply do everything we can collectively to ensure that Vladimir Putin fails, and fails comprehensively, in Ukraine.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The majority of my constituents are “sickened and furious” that the Prime Minister broke the laws that they followed, putting their lives on hold, missing out on big life events and even losing the chance to say goodbye to loved ones, in order to protect the NHS and save lives. Does the Prime Minister agree with my constituent Robert, who believes that lawbreakers should not be lawmakers?

The Prime Minister: I apologise profusely again, particularly to all those who lost loved ones. I know how painful it has been. However, I repeat what I have said: I believe the job of the Government now is to get on with delivering on the priorities of the country at a difficult time.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I know the Prime Minister has offered his wholehearted apology for the fixed penalty notice he received, which I welcome, but I encourage him not to take any lectures from the Labour party, bearing in mind the number of FPNs their previous Cabinet received—and yes, speed does kill—or, on this occasion, the FPNs that the Labour party and the SNP did not receive. Does he agree that everybody should be equal under the law?

The Prime Minister: Of course I agree with that, but let us be frank: the issue here today is what I did and what I got wrong, and I renew my apologies.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Prime Minister accepted the Health Secretary’s resignation for breaking covid guidance, not covid laws. The Prime Minister

then accepted Allegra Stratton’s resignation for joking that the parties that were so frequent in Downing Street were a business event. He is now using her joke as his defence. Why is he holding himself to lower standards than the people whose resignations he accepted?

The Prime Minister: All I can say is that I apologise for what I got wrong. I have explained to the House why I spoke in the House as I did, and what I want to do is get on with the job of the Government in taking this country forward. That is what we are going to do.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I dare say that every Member of this House can bring to mind their own John Robinson, perhaps several. Though you would not know it, I also think that most Members of this House know that justice and mercy and humility also go hand in hand—a fact known by many who watch these proceedings too. In asking us to forgive him on behalf of all those John Robinsons we represent, my right hon. Friend could not have made a more humble apology. But justice leading into mercy relies on a very old-fashioned concept, and that is repentance. What assurance can he give us that nothing of this kind will ever happen again?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said. I am heartily sorry, as I have said. I wish it had not happened and I wish that things had been totally different. What I have already done, as the House will know, is take steps to change the way we do things in No. 10. But that, in itself, is not enough. I accept full responsibility myself for my actions.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s supposed apology to the nation is pathetic. Last year he told bereaved families in Downing Street that he had done everything possible to save their loved ones. Now he has been fined for breaking his own laws, illustrating just how soft the Tories have become on crime. Does he accept that his words ring hollow for those of us who have lost loved ones?

The Prime Minister: I repeat what I have said. I know that the hon. Gentleman has experienced bereavement during the pandemic and I am sorry for his loss. I repeat my apologies for what happened in No. 10.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I was desperately sad to hear about my constituent John Robinson. My own best friend’s mother died in hospital and he was not able to see her. I recall, of course, that the Prime Minister’s mother also died during the covid crisis. We have all suffered from these heart-wrenching tragedies and none of us should forget it. I want to ask a quick question regarding Ukraine. The Prime Minister has announced that he is going to provide new, modern, mobile ground-to-air missile systems. How will we be able to train the Ukrainians during this war situation so that they can be put into use before it is too late?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend and repeat my condolences to his friend. On the Starstreak and other systems that we are using—that we are supplying to Ukraine—the Ukrainians are now being trained, as he can imagine, outside the immediate theatre of conflict.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The Prime Minister genuinely does not seem to understand how he got his fine or what he did to break the law. He wrote, “What an utter nonsense.” If a man is so incompetent that he cannot understand his own rules, is he also a man who cannot understand the public’s challenges given the pace and scale of the soaring cost of living?

The Prime Minister: That is exactly why the Government are focused on those issues. That is what we need to get on with. It is about dealing with the aftershocks of covid, and the impact of the Ukrainian crisis on fuel prices and on inflation. That is where we are focused 100%.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Yes, someone needs to have the courage to get rid of the leader, but it is the leader who is sitting in the Kremlin and causing the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent people. Maybe I only speak for myself, and I say it in all humility, but I am not going to give the satisfaction to that death’s head tyrant of removing a British Prime Minister who has given an apology, and who was working night and day to save thousands of lives and went downstairs to thank his staff who were doing the same job. He has apologised: let us show some compassion.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for what he has said. I just want to say one important thing: it is very important in this Ukrainian crisis that we do not make it an objective to remove the Russian leader or to change politics in Russia. This is about protecting the people of Ukraine, which is what we are doing. Putin will try to frame it as a struggle between him and the west, but we cannot accept that. This is about his brutal attack on the people of Ukraine.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Here we are again, talking about the Prime Minister and his misdemeanours. It is frustrating for all of us on both sides of the House that we still have to be here, but the Prime Minister has led us on this merry dance—nobody else. After all the apologies today, Prime Minister, please resign, because we have had enough. The country deserves better.

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I must respectfully direct her to what I have already said.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): May I recognise the Prime Minister’s contrition, humility and apology before the House today? As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, I thank him for his leadership on Ukraine and pass on the cross-party thanks of people from the Rada, the Parliament in Ukraine, for his leadership in this conflict. I encourage him to steel the resolve and resilience of our EU partners and NATO members that think that if Putin gains eastern and southern Ukraine, he will stop there. Is it not the case that he would be reinvigorated and come back for Kyiv, and perhaps other NATO allies, on another day?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his clarity of thought and his own leadership on Ukraine. I am afraid he is entirely right to say that it is all too possible that Putin will acquire fresh momentum in the east, and I am afraid we could see a resurgence of Russian attacks.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is quite difficult to follow the Prime Minister’s excuses, but I think what he is saying today is that he did not think he was breaking any covid rules because the gathering in respect of which he was fined was covered by a workplace exemption. If that is correct, why did he pay the fixed penalty notice fine? Why did he not refuse to do so and set out his defence in court? I suggest that he did not do so because he was afraid of his track record to date before the courts of both this jurisdiction and my own in Scotland. Judges and juries, like our constituents, tend to have a pretty good handle on issues of credibility and reliability, and that is why the Prime Minister did not take his chances with the court. Is that not correct?

The Prime Minister: I have explained that I believed that the event was in conformity with the rules. That has turned out not to be true. I humbly and sincerely accept that.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for what he has said in the House today, which I think will mean something to my constituents in Harlow. He mentioned that one of the great challenges that the Government are facing is the cost of living. Could he build on the work of the Chancellor in the spring statement and take further measures to cut the cost of living, perhaps either by getting rid of the green levies that account for 25% of our energy bills or by at least introducing a downwards escalator so that when the international energy price goes high, the green levies would be reduced?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend very much, and I know that he has campaigned assiduously for his constituents and the whole country to reduce the burden, particularly of fuel costs. I know that he will have been pleased by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s decision to cut 5p off fuel duty—a record cut—and we will do more as soon as we can to help people with the cost of living.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Prime Minister aware that those of us who have known him for a long time know that he has spent his life apologising humbly? Those of us who know him do not dislike or hate him, but we are waiting for signs that he is mending his ways and changing how he operates. If he thinks that deflecting on to some of the good work that he has done in Ukraine will balance what he has said to the House, may I remind him—he has key links with Washington, as do I—that the view in Washington, Berlin and Paris is that his behaviour here has undermined his status and credibility worldwide?

The Prime Minister: I in no way wish to deflect from the gravity of the fine that I have received. I want to stress again the apology, but I simply must disagree very profoundly with what the hon. Gentleman has just said.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I have heard the Prime Minister apologise countless times in the Chamber today. I am man enough to accept that. This is about a matter of trust. I trusted the Prime Minister to see us through Brexit, and he did. I trusted him to see us through the covid epidemic—bear in mind that he nearly died of it himself—and he did. And do you know something else? [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I have to say that things have to go through the Chair, not to the SNP.

David Morris: I totally agree, Mr Speaker. But do you know something else? Most importantly, this Prime Minister is leading the world against Putin's aggression in Ukraine, and the G7 leaders all respect him for that. And more to the point, so does President Biden. Prime Minister, will you please carry on leading this country?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much indeed. The answer to his question is yes, I will. But that in no way means that I wish to mitigate the offence of which I have been found guilty or to undermine the importance of my apology.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): My constituent Jason Green wrote to me today to tell me how his wife lost her mother suddenly last year but could not travel to be with her father, who himself died three days later, because they were following the law. They did not get to the funerals either, because they were abiding by the law. Jason does not forgive the Prime Minister. He says that the apologies are too late and that the Prime Minister should resign. What does the Prime Minister have to say to Jason and his family?

The Prime Minister: I apologise again—not just to Jason, but to the families of all those who lost loved ones during covid. I repeat what I told the House earlier.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and for the way in which he made it. President Zelensky said yesterday that the conflict in Ukraine has moved to the second phase. We all recognise that the balance between offensive and defensive weapons is very fine. As the conflict continues to develop, will my right hon. Friend continue to review where that line stands?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend asks an extremely important question. I do not think any NATO country, any western country, wants to see its forces or our own weaponry, troops and personnel directly engaged with Russia, but it is wholly legitimate and morally right to give the Ukrainians the equipment with which to protect themselves.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): The Prime Minister has come here today and, in some respects, I would have very much welcomed an entire statement about what has been happening in Ukraine. It feels a bit like he seeks cover, which is shameful. The truth of the matter is that, on the cost of living crisis and all the issues that we face both domestically and in foreign affairs, the fundamental issue of whether people can trust our politics matters. If Conservative Members do not ask the Prime Minister to bear the rigour of the things that are put in place to ensure that leaders cannot mislead this House—if they do not walk through the Lobby to do that—they will set a dangerous precedent. So, through you, Mr Speaker, I speak to them rather than to the Prime Minister. But I ask the Prime Minister: should I look forward to a similar statement after the next fine? And, to stretch the metaphor, after three speeding fines, one has one's driving licence removed, so at what point in his fine history will he see sense?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member very much and want to repeat what I have said already: I apologise for the fine I have received. I cannot comment about any hypothetical situations.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I know that many in Aberconwy have written to me about their upset at events, but I know too that many in Aberconwy will have heard the Prime Minister's apology today and will welcome it. I welcome it; indeed, perhaps we all have the hope that there is forgiveness in our future and not just punishment for our past. I also welcome the fact that the Prime Minister talked about his obligations, so will he please update the House on his commitment to strengthening the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much, and thank him for all the work that he does to protect and support the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As he knows, it is under a lot of pressure, caused by the Northern Irish protocol, which I believe is undermining the balance of the Good Friday agreement, and we will have to sort it out.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Prime Minister debases himself, he debases his office, he debases his Government and he debases those who seek to defend him. He is a millstone around his party's neck. The Welsh Conservatives' 18-page local election manifesto makes zero reference to the Prime Minister. It appears that they, like a number of his own Back Benchers, do not want to be associated with him. Can he explain why?

The Prime Minister: I think what they probably want to have in Wales is better government. I would think they are campaigning for the investment in the NHS that I am afraid both Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru have failed to deliver.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his fulsome apology today. Given that, does he agree that the priority for the House and the Government must be the very real challenges facing our country, particularly the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the cost of living pressures caused by covid and worsened by Russia's war on Ukraine? Coming from Poland, having helped with Ukrainian child refugees last week, I pass on, if I may, the widespread respect and admiration in which his leadership on Ukraine is held.

The Prime Minister: May I thank my hon. Friend very much for what she has been doing to help refugees in Poland? We talked about it the other day. I know that many other Members across the House are doing the same, and I thank them all.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I share the Prime Minister's thoughts on Ukraine. Over Easter, my constituents collected the morning-after pill to send to Ukraine for women who are being raped by Russian forces. But their disgust, and their admiration for Britain's role, does not dampen their anger at the Prime Minister's action. It was not just the crime, but the lie, the obfuscation and the fake apologies—

Mr Speaker *rose*—

Lloyd Russell-Moyle—that got—

Mr Speaker: Order. No, I decide; I am sorry, you cannot take my job. You are the Back Benchers, I am in the Chair. We do not use the word “lie”. I explained that earlier and I stand by it, so I am sure you will withdraw it immediately.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The sentence is not about the Prime Minister, but I will withdraw it if you do not like that word, Mr Speaker.

Those were the things that got Jeffrey Archer, Fiona Onasanya and Chris Huhne kicked out of this place or forced to resign. Of course, I have no hope of the Prime Minister’s Front Benchers, who are tax-dodging, Russian-financed snowflakes, but I do have higher hopes for his Back Benchers, so how many Back Benchers should have their credibility destroyed in supporting the Prime Minister?

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us try and see if we can keep it temperate and moderate. “There was no individual mentioned, so therefore it was within the rules”—that is not what I would expect, but that is where we are.

The Prime Minister: I heard what the hon. Member said. I do not agree with it, and nor do I agree with what he said about those on the Front Bench.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I was lucky, in that on Saturday night I got to hold the hand of my father-in-law as he died of complications from covid, so I understand the anger that many people feel and the challenge that we all face when it comes to the credibility of our Government and the good actions of this Conservative Government, which I support. But I have to ask my right hon. Friend what steps he has in mind to restore the moral authority of this Government.

The Prime Minister: I think the best thing the Government can do is to continue to deliver on the promises that we made to the British people, and that is what we are doing.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The respected constitutional historian Lord Peter Hennessy reminds us that it is the Prime Minister who is the guardian of the ministerial code. What can we do to protect that code when the person who is entrusted with guarding it breaks the code and its overarching duty to comply with the law, and becomes, in the words of Lord Hennessy, “a rogue Prime Minister”?

The Prime Minister: I do not agree with that characterisation. I have explained to the House why I spoke as I did, and I have apologised for the mistake that I made.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): My constituents in Sedgefield have expressed their satisfaction at how we are helping the people of Ukraine, but also their frustration and anger at events in No. 10. They also believe that one is not linked to the other. The Prime Minister’s contrition over his error is welcome, and I thank him for it. While it was a clear error of judgment, I certainly do not

believe it is a resigning matter. If it was, then, regardless of Ukraine, it still would be. I, like many, have missed the funeral of a close friend, but I would still have missed that funeral regardless of the PM’s error, because the rules were correct and his error does not change that. As regards Ukraine, though, may I encourage him to please continue his efforts with full vigour?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much. I understand the frustration and anger of his constituents in Sedgefield. I understand perfectly how they feel; I renew my apologies to them, and I also share what he has to say about Ukraine.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Conservative Members have talked about repentance, the Prime Minister has offered us his apology, and we are being asked to move on, but the critical question for all of us is whether the Metropolitan police has moved on from this matter. The Prime Minister says that he cannot deal with hypotheticals, but now that it has occurred to him what a party actually is, can he tell us whether he expects more fines to come? Yes or no?

The Prime Minister: I would love to give more commentary on this, but I have told the House very clearly that I cannot do that until the investigation is complete.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): The deputy head of the Ukrainian President’s office has said that the UK is the leader in defence support for Ukraine, the leader in the anti-war coalition and the leader in sanctions against the Russian aggressor. With Russia’s offensive in the Donbas beginning the next stage of Putin’s appalling invasion, can my right hon. Friend assure me that the UK will remain the leader of international efforts to support Ukraine, including by persuading all our friends and allies of the need to stand up to Putin’s outrageous actions?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much. I know that the whole House—I think the unity on this has been important—will want the UK Government to continue to take that role, and we will certainly will.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): People across these islands had to watch through care home windows as their loved ones died. Parents had to bury their children without the comfort of their family around them. While that was happening, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor were partying in Downing Street. We know he has no respect for the public, but can he show us that he has some respect—just a little bit of respect—for himself and please, please, please resign now?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I understand the feelings of his constituents, but I must direct him to what I said earlier on.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): May I welcome the Prime Minister’s renewed focus on nuclear energy and its power to transform our energy independence? Does he also recognise that we need not just energy independence, but independence in our foundation industries such as chemicals and steel?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. Can I congratulate my hon. Friend on his recent marriage, by the way? We certainly see nuclear energy as of vital importance, as well of course as investing in our new technologies, which is why we are putting record investments into R&D—£22 billion.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): The Prime Minister broke the laws that he made—laws to protect public health—and then repeatedly misled Parliament. Does the Prime Minister agree that comments made by his Northern Ireland Secretary this morning comparing his fine to a parking ticket are insulting, and when will he do what the majority of those in this country want and resign?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member. Look, I in no way minimise the importance of the fine I have received, as I have said several times this afternoon.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): We all have our faults and I am sure the Prime Minister would agree that he has his share of his own, but he also has many attributes, and one of them is courage. It took courage to go to Ukraine to stand up for freedom and for people who have been subjected to barbarism. I must take this opportunity to ask my right hon. Friend if he will review the cuts to our armed forces and ensure that the future of this country is invested in to meet this future and very real threat.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a valiant campaigner for the armed forces in all their guises, and quite rightly. It is partly thanks to the lobbying of himself and others like him that we have increased defence spending by record sums—£24 billion—and that has enabled us and helped us greatly in helping our Ukrainian friends.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): A constituent wrote to me about his feelings about the Downing Street parties. Good Friday was the second anniversary of the death of his wife, a healthcare assistant at Bolton Hospital, who died from covid. Over the 10 days she was ill, he was not able to go with her to hospital or visit her until just before she died. After she died, he had to plan her funeral alone, there was no wake, and after the funeral he had to go back to an empty home with no support from family and friends. It is clear that the Conservative party wants to move on, but since his wife died, my constituent tells me he has been unable to work, to move on or to grieve. I want to ask my constituent's question to the Prime Minister directly:

"I followed the law to the letter, so why does the government think that the laws don't apply to them?"

The Prime Minister: I want to say again how sorry I am for the loss of the hon. Member's constituent, and I apologise to him personally and to his family—all those who lost loved ones—and it is a measure of the seriousness with which I take this today. Of course, we think the law applies to us: of course it does.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): At high altitude, one's nose starts to bleed. With the rise in national insurance and more tax than for 70 years,

our constituents are crying out for help—whether with their energy bills, whether with the rents that have gone up by at least 20% in some parts of my constituency—yet we will be facing this sort of debate day after day until the Prime Minister faces up to his responsibility and resigns, or the Conservative Members here take him out. That is the choice before we can actually start to focus on the things that matter.

The Prime Minister: May I respectfully say to the hon. Member that I think the real choice that this Government—this House of Commons—should follow is getting on with the job of serving the people we were elected to serve and helping them with the costs of living? That is what we are doing.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): At Prime Minister's questions on Wednesday 8 December, the Prime Minister said

"there was no party and...no covid rules were broken."—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 372.]

Today, he refers to his lawbreaking as a "mistake". Can the Prime Minister explain to my constituents, and indeed to children across these isles, what the difference is between a lie and a mistake?

The Prime Minister: I have apologised deeply for what I got wrong, and I have explained to the House why I spoke as I did on that occasion and others.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Many references have been made to the views of the electorate of this country, and I can tell the Prime Minister that those views are shared by my constituents as well. So I would ask the Prime Minister: would he be prepared to take a truth detection test after every prime ministerial statement?

The Prime Minister: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is being serious, but I spoke in all good faith to the House, and I will continue to do so.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I wonder what continued purpose the Prime Minister sees for the ministerial code, given the frequency with which it is seemingly broken with impunity. How can the UK be a credible leader on liberal democratic values around the world, when the basic norms of accountability are thrown aside to save the skin of one man?

The Prime Minister: The answer to that question is staring the hon. Member in the face, if he looks at what is happening around the world. The UK is providing moral, political and diplomatic leadership as well as military support, and that is what we will continue to do.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Prime Minister happens to believe that he did not knowingly break the law. Many of my constituents will have difficulty accepting that. However, if we suspend disbelief for a minute, the Prime Minister is—this is based on his own words—telling the world that he did not know what the rules were, so I ask him: does he think someone who does not understand the laws they are bringing in is fit to lead this country?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member very much. I have explained why I thought that the event was within the rules, and I apologise very sincerely.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Many Newcastle upon Tyne Central residents have contacted me to share precious moments missed, and have charged me with holding the Prime Minister to account. They do not accept his apology, because they thought long and hard about the difficult decisions they had to make, weighing up the huge personal cost against the terrible consequences of spreading the virus. They made the right decision. The Prime Minister did not, apparently because he is too stupid to understand his own regulations. If he is so much stupider than my constituents, why—how—can he claim to lead them and the nation?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member's constituents very much for what they did throughout the pandemic. It is thanks to people up and down the country who followed the rules that we have been able to defeat covid, or beat it back in the way that we have, and I apologise heartily for what I got wrong.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I, like so many others in this place, I am sure, am profoundly proud of the way in which the people of this country stood together and showed commitment and resolve throughout the covid crisis. They are now facing a cost of living crisis, and on top of all that, they are giving 100% support to the people of Ukraine. It breaks my heart that they have been so badly let down by the person to whom they looked to lead them with the same sort of commitment and honour that they have shown. Does the Prime Minister recognise that no apology, however heartfelt or genuine, can make up for that loss of faith? Perhaps it is time he recognised that the people of this country deserve better.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member very much, and I understand completely people's feelings about covid, what they did and the failings in No. 10, but I think that the job of the Government is to get on and deliver for those very people now facing the cost of living crisis that she describes, and that is what we are going to do.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Prime Minister, I personally found that apology shocking. People have lost loved ones and have not been able to attend their funerals. My BTEC tutor in performing arts, Martin Cosgrif, sadly passed away from covid. He saw something in the young me, who many felt was destined for nothing, and encouraged me to attend university. He was a fantastic man and is deeply missed by all his students. In the words of one of his friends, "We were his children," yet none of us was able to attend his funeral. What does the Prime Minister say to all of Martin's former students from Accrington and Rossendale College, who were unable to mark the passing of this influential man?

The Prime Minister: He sounds like a remarkable man, and I am very sorry for the hon. Lady's loss, and the loss of all the pupils she mentions.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): We have rightly heard from Conservative Members about the barbaric nature of Putin's aggressive attitude to Ukraine, but nothing about the Prime Minister's party returning the donations it has received from friends of Putin; when can we hear about that?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady very much, and all donations are registered in the normal way.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) said that he felt that the issues covered by the statement were not linked, but I have to disagree. We support Ukraine because we support democracy, self-determination and the international rules-based order. Does the Prime Minister not understand that when we go to other countries and ask them to follow a rules-based order, they will now simply say, "You don't follow your own rules, mate, so why should we follow the rules you want us to follow"? He is undermining this country and our reputation abroad.

The Prime Minister: On the contrary, I believe that people abroad can see how closely our leaders and rulers are held to account, and that is exactly what we are fighting for and helping the Ukrainians to defend.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In yet another shameless episode, the Prime Minister comes here and says, "I am sorry I was caught, but there is a war in Ukraine and a cost of living crisis"—a crisis that his Government have done nothing to alleviate. We are asked to believe that this lawbreaking, incompetent Prime Minister is the best the UK can rely on during this time of crisis for Ukraine and for the cost of living. Is that not a metaphor for the UK, of which he is the figurehead, and is it not time for him to go?

The Prime Minister: The most important thing is that we focus on the priorities of the people of this country—in Scotland and around the country—and tackle the aftershocks of covid, the effects of the war in Ukraine and the impact on inflation, and that is what we are doing.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister think that he broke the law?

The Prime Minister: I completely accept that the police are right, and that is why I have paid the fine.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): At every stage the Prime Minister has given the House and the public a different account or version of what happened until more revelations forced him to change his mind. The Prime Minister has outlined that he is sorry, and he should be sorry, because he almost died from this disease—and the staff at St Thomas' Hospital in my constituency who treated him did not have a party for nine minutes. Does the Prime Minister not understand that he is a distraction? Constituents write to me about issues such as the cost of living and the crisis in Ukraine; will the Prime Minister do the decent thing and end this distraction by resigning?

The Prime Minister: The best and most decent thing we can all do is help our constituents with the issues that matter most to them, and the hon. Lady mentions the No. 1 and No. 2 issues.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Trust and confidence in our democracy is at an all-time low. Does the Prime Minister accept his part in that lack of confidence and trust? Should we not put the ministerial code on a statutory footing, and have it underpinned by the Nolan principles, in the same way that it is in the devolved Governments?

The Prime Minister: I repeat what I said earlier: there could not be a clearer expression of the robustness of our democracy than that all of us must be held to account. I have been held to account, and I apologise very sincerely.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The public will be appalled by the Prime Minister's statement, because not only did he make a statement to the nation virtually every night during the pandemic, but the Government he leads spent hundreds of millions of taxpayers' pounds on advertising campaigns demanding that the public followed the rules. One featured a woman in intensive care on a ventilator. The Prime Minister must have seen it; it said:

"Look her in the eyes and tell her you never bend the rules."

Three months ago I reminded him of this, and asked him to explain himself; he told me to wait until after the police had investigated. They now have; it is clear that he bent the rules. He is taking the public for fools, isn't he?

The Prime Minister: I apologise again. I thank the public very much for what they did: by their collective action, they have helped us to keep covid at bay.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): But giving an apology and then carrying on is not being held to account. Does the Prime Minister recognise that there is a very serious problem for the long term in leaving a lawbreaker in charge of the lawmakers?

The Prime Minister: I have said what I have said. I apologise and want to say again to the House that when I spoke before in this Chamber about events in Downing Street, I spoke in good faith.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The Prime Minister spent less than two minutes addressing his lawbreaking in his statement to the House; that is somewhat less than the full account he has promised for the last few weeks. The one thing our constituents wanted to hear was a resignation statement, not any more of these mealy-mouthed apologies. The public will be astounded that the word they now most associate with the Prime Minister we cannot use to describe him in this House. The country knows what he is; we know what he is; and I think the Prime Minister even knows what he is. Will he now, for the sake of this country, just go?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much and repeat what I said earlier. I apologise and direct him to my earlier statement.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Margot from Acton turns five on Saturday. We were talking at an Easter service over the break, and she wanted me to ask the Prime Minister to come to her party, while her parents, in common with the majority of our nation—look at any opinion poll—think he should signal his intention to step down today. To spare himself the embarrassment of the local election results and further fines to come—he cannot rule out further fines for even more boozy parties that were much worse than being ambushed by a cake—will he do both? That way—he has able deputies—he can have something nice to look forward to at the weekend, somewhere where there will be no illegality.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady very much for her kind invitation. I do not know whether Margot herself wants to extend the invitation, but I am afraid I will be busy doing what we are doing: getting on with delivering the priorities of the British people.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Lord Denning said, "No matter how high you are, the law is above you." Isn't it time to go, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I agree very much with Lord Denning, and that is why I apologise in the way that I do.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Having read the Prime Minister's apology, may I say on behalf of the people of Argyll and Bute, is that it? It is no wonder I have been inundated with emails from constituents who believe the Prime Minister has been treating them like fools. Typical of the emails I have received is one this morning from Cathy in Helensburgh, who described the Prime Minister as

"a self-serving, truth-twisting charlatan."

Of course I would never use such language in this place, but Cathy's assessment is absolutely correct. Does the Prime Minister recognise this to be a widely held view of his character?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have asked for moderate and temperate language; that is not a clever way of getting around that. I ask the hon. Gentleman to think long and hard before doing that again—and this might be a warning to others. I am sure the hon. Gentleman would like to withdraw the way he put that.

Brendan O'Hara: Mr Speaker, with respect to you and the Chair, I withdraw the remarks I made.

The Prime Minister: In that case, I humbly remind the hon. Gentleman of the apology I have given.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Prime Minister's case for his defence seems to be based on it being impossible for him to resign because of the Ukraine war, but his entire parliamentary party, from where his replacement would be drawn, is united around the Government position on Ukraine, and of course there are numerous examples of Conservative Members of Parliament moving against leaders, such as Margaret Thatcher in 1990 and Chamberlain in 1940, so will the Prime Minister explain to the House why he specifically

[Stephen Kinnock]

and individually has to carry on as Prime Minister at this time? Surely it is not because he thinks that this House trusts him to do so.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman asks an elaborate question; let me give a simple answer: I have apologised and continue to apologise, and what I want to do is get on with the job.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): When is the Prime Minister going to stop dissembling, distracting and deflecting and start telling the truth to this House?

The Prime Minister: At all times, I have spoken in good faith to this House.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): This is the first Prime Minister in office to make and break his own rules for lockdown offences. Neil Ferguson resigned from SAGE and Catherine Calderwood quit as Scotland's Chief Medical Officer—both for breaking covid rules. They realised that actions speak louder than words, and they took responsibility. Why is it right for them to resign and not for the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady very much and repeat the apology that I have given.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The Prime Minister has broken the law—guilty as charged—that many people up and down our shores abided by. They never had the opportunity to say goodbye to loved ones. The Prime Minister also misled the House over and over again and misled the public over and over again. Does he believe in the ministerial code? Is it worth the paper it is written on?

The Prime Minister: Let me repeat my apologies for what I got wrong and what went wrong in Downing Street and also my explanation for why I have spoken as I have in this House.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Originally, there was one party, and the Prime Minister told the House that he had been assured that there was no party. It then turned out that there were parties but he was not in attendance. He then had to tell the House that he had in fact attended parties. He told the House that he had been assured on each occasion of the truth of what he said, so someone must have committed a serious breach of their responsibilities to advise the Prime Minister in a way that led to him coming to the House and inadvertently misleading the House. What has happened to those people?

The Prime Minister: I have apologised for what I have got wrong and I take full responsibility for everything that happened in No.10. For the rest of his question, the hon. Gentleman must wait for the completion of the investigation.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Energy bills are soaring, wages are falling and the cost of living crisis is getting worse and worse, but while my constituents are forced to choose between heating and eating, the

Chancellor is benefiting from the non-dom tax loophole and 17 of the Prime Minister's 22 Cabinet members have refused to deny that they or their families benefit from tax havens or non-dom status. They are laughing in our faces while robbing the public purse. So I ask the Prime Minister, how many more children need to go hungry at night before he stops putting the greed of his super-rich mates before the needs of ordinary people?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can the hon. Lady withdraw "robbing the public purse"? That is just not the case.

Zarah Sultana: Yes.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): If the Downing Street photographer is a publicly funded post, does that mean that all the photographs of the parties are public property and should be available for access?

The Prime Minister: I am not going to comment on the investigation until it is complete.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Truth and honesty matter, and the Prime Minister has repeatedly told the House that all guidance and all rules were observed. That is not true. He also told the House that there were no parties; indeed, his Chancellor also said that he had not attended a party. Neither of those things are true. So, for once in his privileged, entitled life, will he do the decent thing, come to the Dispatch Box, and correct the record? There isn't anybody who is fooled by this, but he continues to take the British people for fools, and they will not put up with it.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much. I want to repeat what I have said about the event in question, for which I have received an FPN. I apologise heartily for that. It was my mistake entirely. I thought it was within the rules and it has turned out not to be the case. As for other events, I'm afraid I am going to have to stick by what I have said previously and await—I hope he will allow me—the conclusion of the investigation.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I got many emails from my constituents over the weekend. One of them has stuck with me; it is from Victoria, who worked in respiratory wards during the covid-19 pandemic. She says:

"I've watched people die alone, sick and confused, begging us to see their family one last time, with only us to hold their hands and comfort them. I've watched family members banging on the locked ward doors, crying, screaming and pleading for us to let them hold their dying loved ones. We were the ones that watched this and enforced this. We were the ones who had to tell families how sorry we were but that the government guidelines meant they couldn't hug their families one last time.

The time for apologies is over, we don't accept them."

When will the Prime Minister resign?

The Prime Minister: I want to thank her for what she has said, but to remind her of what I have already said, which is that I feel the greatest sorrow and grief for those like Victoria who have lost loved ones during the pandemic. I understand the pain that they must feel and the anger that they must feel, and I repeat my apologies.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): The fact that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have both been fined for breaking the very rules that they themselves set means that either they are incompetent or they think that the people of our country are beneath them. Either way, and with the prospect of further fines looming for the Prime Minister, they are not fit to occupy the two highest offices in the land. My constituents of Liverpool, Wavertree have overwhelmingly told me that they do not believe their apologies to be sincere, so the question for my constituents is when they can expect your resignations.

The Prime Minister: I thank her. Look, I cannot offer any further commentary on the investigation. All I can do is renew and repeat the apologies I have given to her constituents, whether they accept them or not.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Only this Prime Minister could have, together with his staff, laughed up their sleeves believing they were above the law and demonstrated to an entire country that they are beneath the public's respect, more accurately. Vacuous self-congratulations from the Tory opposite about the role that the Government are playing in Ukraine are a disservice to the service men and women who are in country, doing the spade work, protecting democracy. To use the bloodshed of the fallen Ukrainians as some sort of political cover to keep this Prime Minister in office is an utter disgrace, but no less than my Angus constituents have come to expect. This Government are compounding the cost of living crisis, but we are led to believe that that, together with the Ukraine crisis, is why we must endure this Prime Minister. So let me test his knowledge. What anti-ship missiles will his Government be sending to Ukraine? If he cannot answer that simple question, will he resign?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. One of the systems that we are looking at, since he asks, is to see if we can mount some Brimstones on the back of technicals to see if that will do the job, but there are other options that I do not want to discuss.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Let me first wish the Prime Minister good luck in their trip to India, where I am sure they will raise the ongoing arbitrary detention of Jagtar Singh Johal with Prime Minister Modi. That said, if the Prime Minister believes that they inadvertently misled the House based on evidence given at the time, surely the Prime Minister would then agree with me and with Alex Massie of *The Spectator* that such an offence rests on the proposition that the Prime Minister is an idiot?

The Prime Minister: I have spoken in good faith and, of course, continue to raise the case of his constituent.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister believe that a Prime Minister of the United Kingdom who openly treats the public like they are mugs is a help or a hindrance to the cause of Scottish independence?

The Prime Minister: I believe that the biggest help to the cause of the Union is the incompetence of the Scottish Nationalists in government.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The whole functioning of this place hangs on the belief that everyone behaves in an honourable way at all times. Unfortunately, the people who matter out there do not believe that we do. We now know that 72% of them think that the Prime Minister is part of the problem; 72% of the citizens of these four nations cannot hear the two words "Boris" and "Johnson" without immediately hearing a word that I am not allowed to say on their behalf. Is the Prime Minister really going to look my constituents in the eye and tell them that the best future they can hope for is a future under a Prime Minister whose character and conduct can only be described in words that are banned from use in this place?

The Prime Minister: I think the best future for the people of Scotland is to continue with the United Kingdom that has served this country well for hundreds of years and whose role is valued around the world, perhaps never more than in the last few months.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Surely it is not a new Member for the SNP? I call Jeff Smith.

Jeff Smith: It is so busy I could not find a space, Mr Speaker.

The event in question happened on 19 June 2020. Two days later, on 21 June, my constituent Steven's partner died of cancer at home. In the weeks before that, she was in hospital. Steven said:

"When she needed me most, I was told I could not visit her because of the no visitors rule. In the texts I received from her, it was obvious that she needed somebody to just talk to and hold her hand."

Steven obeyed the rules and, like so many people, he thinks the Prime Minister should stand down. The defence from Conservative Back Benchers seems to be that he cannot resign because we have a crisis in Ukraine. Does the Prime Minister think he is the only person on the Conservative Benches who is capable of leading the country through a crisis?

The Prime Minister: I apologise sincerely to—I think the hon. Gentleman said the name of his constituent was Steven—Steven and his family for what we got wrong and what I got wrong during the pandemic, and the event for which I have apologised today. But I think the best thing we can do—I have said what I have said about how I have spoken in this House—is get on now with delivering for the people of this country, up and down this country, getting us through the aftershocks of covid, as we got people through the pandemic.

Clive Efford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: There is no point of order now—we are in the middle of statements.

Energy Security Strategy

6.41 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the British energy security strategy.

Our strategy provides a clear, long-term plan to accelerate our transition away from expensive fossil fuel prices set by global markets we cannot control. It builds on our success over the past decade in which we gave the go-ahead to the first nuclear power plant in a generation and achieved a fivefold increase in renewables. The British energy security strategy marks a significant acceleration in our ambition. It is confirmation of three mutually reinforcing goals of our energy policy and, indeed, of any well-constituted energy policy: security, affordability and sustainability.

We recognise the pressures that many people across our country are facing with the cost of living. This has been greatly influenced, as we all know, by global factors. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a £9 billion package of support, including a £150 council tax rebate this month and a £200 energy bill discount in October to cut energy bills quickly for the vast majority of households. We are also expanding the eligibility for the warm home discount, which will provide around 3 million low-income and vulnerable households across England and Wales with a £150 rebate on their energy bills this winter. As I speak, our energy price cap is still protecting millions of consumers from even higher wholesale spot gas prices. Furthermore, we are investing over £6 billion in decarbonising the nation's homes and buildings—set out very clearly in last year's heat and buildings strategy—which saves the lowest-income families around £300 a year on their bills. I want to reassure the House that the Chancellor has promised to review his package of support before October and will decide on an appropriate course of action at that time.

Cheap renewables are our best defence against fluctuations in global gas prices. By 2030, 95% of our electricity will be produced by low-carbon means. By 2035, we aim to have fully decarbonised our electricity system. We will double down on every available technology. The strategy sets out a new ambition to propel our offshore wind industry. It will increase the pace of deployment to deliver 50 GW by 2030, instead of the 40 GW committed to in the manifesto. Of that 50 GW, up to 5 GW will be floating offshore wind. The strategy also commits us to slash approval times for new offshore wind farms from four years to one year. We also feel—this is reflected in the strategy—that our solar capacity can grow by up to five times by 2035.

As is well known, most of Britain's nuclear fleet will be decommissioned this decade. We need to replace what we are losing, but we also need to go further. From large-scale plants to small nuclear modular reactors, we aspire to provide a steady baseload of power that will complement renewable technology. Obviously, the right time to take those decisions would have been 20 years ago, but of course the Labour party all but killed off the British nuclear industry. That is why we will be reversing decades of under-investment and building back British nuclear. We aim to deliver up to 24 GW of nuclear

power by 2050, approximately three times more than today, which will represent 25% of our projected energy demand.

We are also doubling our ambition for low-carbon hydrogen production. The capacity we aim to reach by 2030 is 10 GW, with at least half of that total coming from green, electrolyser-produced hydrogen. This fuel will not only provide cleaner energy for vital British industries to move away from fossil fuels, but will also be used for storage, trains, heavy equipment and generating heat. The transition to cheap, clean power cannot happen overnight. Those calling for an immediate end to domestic oil and gas ignore the fact that it would simply make the UK more reliant on foreign imports. It would not, in fact, lead to greater decarbonisation globally.

Producing more of our own energy will protect us into the future. We feel that this historic change, this decarbonisation challenge, represents a huge opportunity for the United Kingdom: more wind, more solar and more nuclear, while also using North sea gas to transition to cheaper and cleaner power. This is a long-term plan to ensure greater energy independence and to attract hundreds of billions of private investment to back new industries that can create hundreds of thousands of high-quality jobs and stimulate business across the UK. This is not only a matter of reaching net zero, vital as that is, but an issue of national security. These are all objectives that everyone across the House, I am sure, shares. We all wish to see a homegrown clean energy system that will protect our people into the future, create good clean jobs, attract private investment and, above all, drive down bills for the British people. I commend this statement to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Before I call Ed Miliband, I would just like to say that we are going to move on from this statement at 7.20 pm, so a lot of people are going to be disappointed. Can you please focus on asking a question without any preludes, so that we can get as many people in as we possibly can?

6.49 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, but I have to tell him that after all the hype and all the promises, his energy relaunch fails to live up remotely to the scale of the crisis that families are facing. The Government have already failed to deliver the immediate measures needed to help millions of families with their energy bills this year, and they now have an energy security strategy that has rejected the measures that could have made the most difference in the years ahead. It fails to seize the moment on the two most elementary tests of any decent green energy sprint—that is, going all-in on the cheapest forms of home-grown power, such as onshore wind, which, remarkably, was not even mentioned in his statement, and finally delivering on the biggest no-brainer when it comes to an energy strategy: energy efficiency.

Hon Members do not need to take my word for it. We know from all the briefings and interviews that the Secretary of State gave before the relaunch that he has failed to deliver what he wanted. We know that he wanted a hard target to double onshore wind by 2030 and to treble it by 2035, because we have the earlier version of the document in which there were those

targets. The Secretary of State was right because the ban on onshore wind that the Government introduced in 2015 has driven up bills for consumers. What did he say 10 days before the relaunch? He said that he wanted to see a major “acceleration” in onshore wind. The Prime Minister was said to be “horrified” at the delays, but when we got the document, we saw that there was no target, no plan and more imports and higher bills as a result of his failure. Perhaps he can tell us what the nasty accident was that befell the earlier version of his strategy.

On solar, let us be clear that the Government destroyed the solar industry with their decisions in 2015, abolishing the feed-in tariff. In this document, we see weak and vague language—it is even weaker, the House will be interested to know, than in the original version of the document, which is pretty weak in itself. Will the Secretary of State explain why there is no firm target for 2030 and a retreat on large-scale solar?

Let us take energy efficiency next, the biggest failure of all. We know that the Secretary of State wanted extra resources for energy efficiency, because he helpfully briefed the media to that effect. He was right, because that would immediately cut bills, imports and fuel poverty, but again, he failed. There is not a penny more for energy efficiency in this document. Even the Secretary of State’s Minister, Lord Callanan—we have to admire his candour—said on the day:

“It would have been good to go further but, regrettably, that was not possible in this case.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 April 2022; Vol. 820, c. 2196.]

Will the Secretary of State tell us why the Government are failing to deliver when the economic, social and climate case is so overwhelming?

The Government’s failures on onshore wind, solar and energy efficiency matter because they are not just the cheapest and cleanest responses to the crisis that we face, but the quickest to deliver. That is why E.ON, the energy company, said of the strategy that

“there is little in today’s announcement that will deliver...this decade, let alone this year.”

Why? Because the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister caved in to Back Benchers who dislike green energy and a Chancellor who refuses to make the green investments that the country needs. They cannot deliver a green energy sprint because they face both ways on green energy and simply will not make the public investment that we need.

On the other elements of the strategy, we support more ambition on hydrogen and offshore wind. On the latter, however, there are real questions about the investment required in the grid; perhaps the Secretary of State will respond to that point.

On new nuclear, the last Labour Government identified a whole series of sites for new nuclear. The Government have had 12 years in power and they have not completed a single power station.

Of course, the North sea has a role to play in the transition, but will the Secretary of State explain how maximising North sea oil and gas is consistent with all the advice from the International Energy Agency and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on limiting global warming to 1.5°?

On fracking, which the Secretary of State was also too embarrassed to mention, why commission another review rather than having the courage to say out loud

what he believes: that fracking is outdated, will make no difference to prices and is unsafe, unpopular and should have no part in our future energy system?

In conclusion, the truth is that this cobbled-together energy relaunch does nothing on the cost of living and fails to deliver the green sprint that we needed. When it comes to the solutions to energy security, energy bills and the climate crisis, the Secretary of State has shown once again that the Government cannot deliver what the national interest demands.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am pleased, in this Easter season, when Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, that the right hon. Gentleman is back in his place. I thought that he had disappeared for a bit, but it is very good to see him again spinning out the same lines.

Let me deal with some of his accusations. There is plenty about onshore wind in the strategy. The one thing that we say about onshore wind—unlike the right hon. Gentleman’s position—is that it has to be pursued in the context of local community support. We have always had that position and have not moved away from it. People also say, “What about the energy efficiency measures?” He will remember that we had a whole document at the end of last year devoted to energy efficiency—it was called the heat and buildings strategy. He and the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) kept asking month after month, “When will the heat and buildings strategy come out?” It did come out and it addressed precisely the energy efficiency issues that he wished it to.

On nuclear—this is the last thing I will say about the remarks from the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband)—his attempt to pretend that the last Labour Government somehow made us more secure on nuclear is laughable. That did not happen. They were notorious for doing nothing to promote the nuclear industry. They were rather like our Scottish National party friends, who are at least honest about their position—they do not want nuclear. I am still not sure what he believes about nuclear, but we are driving forward nuclear and we are delighted to make it the centrepiece of our strategy.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to point out that the Labour party destroyed Britain’s nuclear industry by failing to build new nuclear projects while in office. Labour is famous for selling off the family gold, but it also sold off cupboards full of silverware, including the UK Atomic Energy Authority Ltd, a very profitable nuclear company. Will my right hon. Friend update us on our new nuclear company, Great British Nuclear, its remit for new nuclear power stations and what that might mean for Moorside in Cumbria?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The development vehicle that we have announced in the strategy will inaugurate a new era for the nuclear industry. If hon. Members speak to anybody in the industry, they will hear people say that no Government in the past 25 years have been so positive and enthusiastic about nuclear power. There will be a great future and that represents a great endorsement for the skills and the industry that my hon. Friend has so ably promoted in the House.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Clearly, this is not a strategy at all, but a series of high-level targets or rehashed information that the Government have spoken about several times. The reality is that the 2022 energy price cap is 75% higher than the April 2021 price cap, putting 6.5 million UK households into fuel poverty. People are going to die and yet there was no additional support announced to alleviate fuel poverty. How many fuel-poor households does the Secretary of State think is acceptable in modern-day Britain? Will he confirm that less than a third of his £9 billion support package is actually direct money from the Treasury that will not be clawed back?

Charities and energy companies alike are calling for much greater investment in energy efficiency, so why is there no additional funding for that? I am pleased that no new money has been announced for the Secretary of State's nuclear fantasy. Does he stand by the impact assessment that states that the cost of a new nuclear power station, including capital finance, is as high as £63 billion?

The Government have included a blue hydrogen target, so why is the Acorn carbon capture and storage cluster still a reserve? Why is there no additional funding to match the doubling of the green hydrogen target? The 50 GW offshore wind target is very welcome, but what is the Secretary of State doing to upgrade the offshore transmission network strategy and to take account of the ScotWind leasing round? When, oh when, will they remove the iniquity of the transmission charges that prejudice Scotland, and does he understand the concerns about the new nodal pricing proposal that has been announced?

When will the Secretary of State get to grip with a funding mechanism for pumped storage hydro, so that SSE can get on and complete the Coire Glas project? If the new dash for oil and gas is to provide energy security, will the Secretary of State advise what percentage of North sea oil and gas gets traded and exported and how much goes abroad for refining?

Finally, will the Secretary of State commit to working with the Treasury to publish figures showing how much in additional oil and gas revenues, how much additional VAT from our energy bills and how much additional VAT on the petrol prices increase it has received, so that we can see the Treasury windfall that has happened during this cost of living crisis?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his barrage of questions; I will try to answer a few of them. His position on nuclear and mine could not be more different, and I am very glad that he is honest and frank about nuclear. I still do not understand what his answer is on decarbonised baseload, in terms of security of supply, but I am grateful for his honesty. He will know that the transmission charges are a matter for Ofgem, and I would be very happy to speak to him and Ofgem about how we can move forward on that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Don't forget: we want short questions and short responses, please.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is aware that the Back-Bench committee on business, energy and industrial strategy has done a very swift and urgent inquiry into how

businesses and households can reduce their energy bills this winter. Will he and the Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change meet me and my vice-chairs to discuss some of the very sensible and practical measures in the inquiry?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Absolutely. I always want to take the opportunity to commend the great work that my right hon. Friend did when she headed the Department, when I was Energy Minister. We are really continuing in that vein. The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change and I will be delighted to meet her and her committee to discuss ideas that will give us security, affordability and sustainability.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): This morning, at the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, I was moved to tears listening to the chief executives of the energy companies telling us how horrific it is going to be for the public and vulnerable people to pay their bills. Now it will be fine and for the summer they will have increases, but in October it is going to be terrible. A short-term fix is not good enough—the people in this country deserve better. We deserve a long-term fix to our prices. The cost of living is extortionate, and the Secretary of State needs to help.

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I said in my statement, we are fully aware of the pressure on people's household bills: it is a really, really extreme issue and we want to deal with it. I also said that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will look at the matter again in October and see whether measures are appropriate. The hon. Lady will know that the price cap is set in August, so there is still a long period before we can work out what it is. It is a matter for Ofgem, and we are waiting to see what level it is set at in August.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My right hon. Friend is well aware of the expertise and expansion in offshore renewables, hydrogen and carbon capture in northern Lincolnshire and the wider region. Does he agree that we could focus on exporting? We have great skill in financial management, planning and construction. Is he working with the Department for International Trade to expand our exports?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend makes a remarkable and interesting point. He will remember that just over two years ago, I visited Grimsby and saw him and many other local MPs, and we talked about the investment and the opportunities. I am very pleased that two and a half years later we have realised a lot of those ambitions. There is still a long way to go, but it is absolutely right to think of exporting our expertise, our talent and our sheer manufacturing ingenuity around the world. I am delighted to support him in that.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): It was reported that there were no further announcements on the strategy for home insulation because when the Secretary of State asked the Chancellor to use £300 million of departmental underspend for that project, the Chancellor said no. Is that true or false?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I do not remember that particular incident, but the hon. Gentleman will know that energy efficiency was the centrepiece of the heat and buildings strategy, which he welcomed only at the end of last year.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The commitment to solar is vital, but does the Secretary of State recognise that food security is as important as energy security? Every building, every warehouse and every commercial enterprise should be covered in solar before a single acre of valuable arable land is consumed by solar farms.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would be very interested to hear my right hon. Friend's views on solar. I think solar is crucial. I am delighted that we have so many former Energy Ministers in the Chamber today; my right hon. Friend was a very distinguished holder of the post, and I am very pleased to engage with him on this important subject.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The triple test of the strategy is whether it helps to cut dependence on Russian gas, whether it brings down bills and whether it secures a safe climate. It manages to fail on all those fronts. It also has a massive hole where energy saving should be.

It has been reported today that the Government are considering scrapping green levies, which support renewables and address fuel poverty, as the Secretary of State knows, and which therefore help to get fuel bills down. Can he reassure me that that rumour is false and that any changes made will simply be about moving those levies to general taxation—or will this be another policy led by a handful of Tory Back Benchers?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I engage with Front-Bench and Back-Bench colleagues all the time and they have lots of brilliant ideas. I do not recognise the hon. Lady's characterisation of the strategy; I think it does deliver on security, it does deliver on longer-term affordability and it does deliver on the sustainable net zero targets that many in this House agree with.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): One of the hurdles that families face when they look at putting in a heat pump or investing in home insulation is that they cannot afford the up-front costs to get the long-term gains. The enterprise investment scheme has been extremely successful in encouraging investment in entrepreneurship, which has a somewhat similar cash-flow profile, so will my right hon. Friend have a word with the Chancellor about whether we can implement a net zero enterprise investment scheme to marshal private capital to help with the social objective of achieving net zero?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have a number of such schemes in existence and have trialled a number of others. We are always iterating the way in which we attract private capital to meet net zero; that is what we have been doing for the past three years, since net zero was passed into legislation.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): When fracking was halted in June 2019, Ministers said that they would not bring it back without compelling evidence. Now, however, the Government say that all options are back on the table. Where is the compelling new evidence that puts fracking back on the table?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I have been very clear. The hon. Lady is right to mention 2019: in October 2019 I was responsible—as was my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), who was Secretary of State at the time—for announcing the moratorium. The facts about the wholesale price have changed: it is 10 times higher than at the end of 2019. I think that it is perfectly right to look at the resources that we have in our country to see whether we can use gas here for greater energy security.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): May I build on the excellent question from my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), with which I agree? The Secretary of State has included in his medium and long-term strategy the ambition to raise solar power from 14 GW to 70 GW, which would obviously make an enormous contribution to renewable energy generation. Will he follow up the excellent work that he undertook with the Treasury to remove VAT on solar panel installation and also press for VAT to be removed from electricity storage for battery walls and similar products in domestic homes?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend will appreciate that tax issues specifically are not in my portfolio, but I speak to the Chancellor of the Exchequer all the time about how we can incentivise investment in new, exciting green technologies. That is something that we are very pleased to do.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I think that all of us in this House, when we think of the energy crisis, would want to encourage our constituents to take forward energy efficiency measures, but in one particular type of property—the tenement properties that we have right across Glasgow's east end—energy efficiency is even more problematic. Will the Secretary of State meet me to look at the specific energy efficiency challenges that Glaswegians face?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, as I meet many of his Scottish colleagues, to discuss really critical energy issues.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): I very much welcome the commitment to rebuilding Britain's nuclear industry. It is great news for consumers and it should be great news for the UK steel industry, particularly Speciality Steel in Stocksbridge in my constituency, which specialises in producing the kind of high-value steel required for such projects. I know that my right hon. Friend has welcomed Sizewell C's decision to sign the UK steel charter. Can he confirm that that means it must commit to purchasing steel made and poured in the UK?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I cannot make any commitments on behalf of the company, because it is at arm's length and has its own corporate structure, as my hon. Friend will know. However, as Secretary of State I have always championed the steel industry, which is vital for national security and for levelling up. It is a hugely important industry and I am very happy to work with her to promote it.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Onshore wind is the cheapest power available to us, and the cleanest. Does the Secretary of State accept that bills for families and business will be much higher as a result of his failure to back it?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have done more than many in driving onshore wind. The hon. Lady will know that we suspended the pot 1 auction and have brought it back, that we have more onshore wind than pretty much any other country in northern Europe, and that we continue aggressively and passionately to promote onshore wind.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The retail energy market saw the big six suppliers increase to 90. Several were granted licences despite being undercapitalised, which caused them to fail and placed a burden on all consumers. We know that competition in the market is vital; what steps will the Secretary of State will be taking to make it effective?

Kwasi Kwarteng: In partnership with Ofgem, we have discussed trying to secure a much more resilient energy retail market, with financial covenants involving much more financial discipline and financial disclosure, as well as other ways in which we can ensure that what happened last winter does not happen again.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Some 12,000 households in my constituency rely on prepayment meters. The chief executive of ScottishPower rightly raised that issue with the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee today, saying that it was perverse that those people—often the most vulnerable—can end up paying higher rates than people with direct debit arrangements. Will the Secretary of State take this up with the energy companies, and, if necessary, compel them to ensure that the most vulnerable members of society are not paying the highest prices?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I think it was Keith Anderson who spoke to the Committee this morning. I speak to Keith and others in the sector all the time, as does the Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands). We will definitely look into this issue, because it seems disproportionate and unfair that people with prepayment meters should be paying so much more than those with direct debits, and we shall be happy to take it up with the leaders in the sector.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to a new generation of nuclear power stations. Can he confirm that the eight designated sites remain the Government's preferred locations for those, including Bradwell in my constituency, and has he yet reached a view on whether a Chinese-designed reactor could be included?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As my right hon. Friend will know, Bradwell passed the generic design assessment. That was an arm's-length process in which the Government did not become involved. There is clearly a discussion to be had about how we can take Bradwell forward, but, as my right hon. Friend knows, there is an absolute commitment to up to eight sites. I am not saying eight, because obviously we have small modular reactors as well, but eight sites would mean roughly 24 GW.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State visited Bristol recently to look at the ambitious projects that are going on there, including new water source heat pumps and the City Leap partnership. Is the Secretary of State aware of what is going on in Bristol, and what can he do to help cities to decarbonise?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I know that Bristol has a strong tradition of green, carbon-reducing policies. I should be happy to visit the city and see the great work that is being done there. It is a part of the world that I know well from Airbus and other great industrial concerns.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on this excellent document. May I press him on the review of energy market arrangements and the long-term fundamental reform of the underlying market? Will he reassure me, and others on this side of the House—at the very least—that that will be done in a spirit that will maximise competition and consumer choice to ensure that we make the customer the king and the queen, and that it will include price cap reform?

Kwasi Kwarteng: All these issues are being looked at. The six-month periods for the price cap are being reviewed, and, as I have said, financial resilience for new entrants will be considered. A subject that has not been mentioned so far is the future system operator and the electricity system operator. That is a remarkable innovation, and I am proud that it is included in the document. I should be happy to talk to my hon. Friend about these matters.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State has said that this is a long-term strategy, and obviously we need that, but there is a short-term problem, namely that people cannot afford to pay their bills at present. That is partly due to the green levies, which amount to about £400 a year in additional costs to individuals. What plans has the Secretary of State to deal with that? Given his plans for a number of new offshore wind turbines, may I ask how many he believes are needed, and at what cost? What is the cost of connection to the grid, and how will that affect the capital costs on people's energy bills?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, in the time during which I—indeed, I suspect, both of us—have been in the House, renewables have really taken off. They are the one bit of the energy story here in the UK that has been genuinely transformative and a world leader, and I am very proud of that. As for the immediate support for hard-pressed consumers facing a global price hike, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor committed £9 million to help people to pay their bills.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): What steps are being taken to ensure that the future energy strategy of the UK is secured by the manufacture of hydrogen fuel cells in the UK—in, say, Loughborough?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I had a feeling that my hon. Friend was going to mention Loughborough. She will know that we are absolutely committed to hydrogen. It has many uses: it can be used, potentially, in the gas grid, in transport—to which she alluded—and in industrial

processes. We are very excited about the opportunities, outlined in the strategy, for more capacity so that we can drive innovation in those areas.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): In 2019—it was during the general election campaign, but I am sure that was just a coincidence—the Government said that fracking in Lancashire would be off the table, that there would be a moratorium and that the wells would be filled with concrete. May I ask the Secretary of State what has changed between 2019 and today that has put fracking back on the table? What on earth did he get from COP26?

Kwasi Kwarteng: There has been an issue with the wholesale gas price, which has gone up about 10 times during that period. It seems entirely reasonable, if we have gas underneath our feet, to consider the possibility of using it.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend like to come to Heysham and look at the two reactors that are working in my constituency? The whole community is behind the nuclear power industry, and it is our future, so I extend that invitation to my right hon. Friend.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I should be very happy to go with my hon. Friend to see the nuclear reactors. The future is decarbonised baseload power. That is what we need, and it is something with which my hon. Friend and I are 100% aligned.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The Secretary of State has said that his energy strategy would “drive down bills for British people”. By how much?

Kwasi Kwarteng: That obviously refers, relatively, to whatever the wholesale price of gas will be. I am not a gas trader, and nor is the hon. Gentleman. He has no idea what the wholesale gas price will be either. The strategy will have a tendency to lower prices.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): If recent events have shown us one thing, it is the importance of having our own strategic steel industry—something that I know the Secretary of State understands. The announcement of the expansion of the energy-intensive industries compensation scheme is welcomed by the industry, but can the Secretary of State tell us when we will know the details of that?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We are in constant conversation about this. It was a hard-earned win for the Government, and we are very pleased to be backing steel. My hon. Friend knows of my commitment to the industry. We have won some battles, and I look forward to engaging with him on this in the future.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Deputy Speaker, you will know, as a Lancashire MP, that the people of Lancashire are fed up to the back teeth with fracking. As the Secretary of State knows, the moratorium came in 2019 because Lancashire was experiencing tremors measuring 8 on the Richter scale. It was a safety measure,

because we were worried about safety. It was nothing to do with the wholesale gas price, so please, Secretary of State, do not come out with that now.

Kwasi Kwarteng: There was drilling, and I remember it well. When I was the Energy Minister, I was receiving daily updates on the Richter scale, and yes, there were moments—there were times—when the level exceeded the limit that we had imposed. I think it entirely legitimate now, given where gas prices are, to look again at some of the evidence.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the publication of the report, which provides certainty for so many sectors, particularly oil and gas, and nuclear. However, much attention has rightly been paid to the support for energy-intensive industries, and there have understandably been many questions involving the steel industry. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the support extends to the chemical industry, given that the Dow Corning has a site in my constituency, as well as others?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend knows very well that the chemical industry is central not only to people in his constituency, but to those throughout the north-east. We engage with energy-intensive sectors such as the glass, steel and chemical sectors, and others.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Ceramics?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Ceramics, yes. All those industries are covered by the energy-intensive scheme that we want to promote.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): One of the greatest constraints on decarbonisation is the skill supply. Will the Secretary of State publish a workforce plan for the energy sector, so we can ensure that we are making the necessary investment in the skills that we need, both now and in the future?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. That is why, when I was the Energy Minister, I—along with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson), the then Education Secretary—set up the green jobs taskforce, working with unions across the sector. We came up with some very good proposals. We are driving that forward, because we recognise the skills gap and want to close it.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I am delighted that Wylfa is specifically included in the British energy security strategy, and I look forward to welcoming the Energy Minister to Ynys Môn in a few weeks. The new Wylfa nuclear plant will bring local jobs for local people. Will the Minister consider discounting electricity bills for locals, and locating the headquarters of the new Great British Nuclear vehicle in north Wales, in recognition of the nuclear expertise and heritage in the area?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I think I would be getting a bit ahead of myself if I were to decide here and now at the Dispatch Box where that body will be sited, but I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's tireless and passionate advocacy for the nuclear industry. She, among a number of others

[*Kwasi Kwarteng*]

in this Chamber, has been a brilliant champion, and I look forward to working with her to drive nuclear power in Wylfa and across the country.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): People used to have their water supply cut off if they could not pay their bill, until it was made illegal to do so. Given that more and more of our constituents will be unable to pay their gas and electricity bills as the year progresses, does the Secretary of State share my concern that more and more prepayment metres will be installed in response, and that our constituents will in effect end up disconnecting themselves because they do not have enough money to put in the meter? If so, what is he going to do about it?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I said in an earlier answer, I speak to the industry all the time. This has been raised, and we want to prevent people from having to take up prepayment metres if they can avoid it. That is something that we have done through a number of interventions to try to reduce the impact of very high prices globally. I also refer the right hon. Gentleman to the fact that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced a £9 billion package to help people who face high bills.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am afraid that this will have to be the last question. I call Jack Brereton.

Jack Brereton: Energy price fluctuations are a particular issue for the ceramics sector. Over Easter, I was delighted to visit 1882 Ltd, a ceramics producer in my constituency that has raised these concerns with me. What is my right hon. Friend doing to support the ceramics sector, and all energy-intensive sectors, to reduce the cost of energy and help to increase energy sustainability?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend will have noticed that there is a commitment in the strategy to energy-intensive users. From his first day here, he has been a tireless champion of the ceramics industry. I was pleased to see him in his constituency when I went there, and to the other Stoke constituencies. I look forward to working with him to ensure that we protect our precious ceramics industry in the UK.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I am sorry that some people did not get in—a note will be taken of their names—but we have real time pressure today.

Points of Order

7.22 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On 4 April, during the Easter recess, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport posted a tweet that read:

“I have come to the conclusion that government ownership is holding Channel 4 back from competing against streaming giants like Netflix and Amazon. A change of ownership will give Channel 4 the tools and freedom to flourish and thrive as a public service broadcaster long into the future.”

That announcement was made directly through social media, so elected Members of Parliament had no opportunity to question the Secretary of State on behalf of our constituents. Why was this announced on Twitter during the recess, instead of to the House, Mr Deputy Speaker? Have you been informed of any forthcoming statement from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and can you suggest what means I should pursue to get the Secretary of State to come to the Chamber to answer relevant questions on this issue?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and for giving forward notice of it. Mr Speaker has made it absolutely clear that he wants any important statements to be made to Parliament first, rather than being made in any other form, never mind on social media. I have been given no indication of whether a statement will be made today, or indeed in the future, but I am sure that there will be ample opportunity for the hon. Gentleman to question the Secretary of State on the possible privatisation of Channel 4.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We had a statement today from the Prime Minister, in which he was questioned about the fine that he received for breaking the law over covid restrictions, but we know that the Chancellor of the Exchequer also received a fine for breaking the law. Does that require him to come to the House to make a statement too, and have you been given notice that he intends to do so?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. I have been given no indication that the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be making a statement on that or any other matter, but again, I am absolutely certain that there will be ample opportunity for people to question Ministers in the coming days, weeks and months.

Sewage Discharges

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

7.24 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for mandatory targets and timescales for the ending of sewage discharges into waterways and coastal areas; to make provision about the powers of Ofwat to monitor and enforce compliance with those targets and timescales; to require water companies to publish quarterly reports on the impact of sewage discharges on the natural environment, animal welfare and human health; to require the membership of water company boards to include at least one representative of an environmental group; and for connected purposes.

It is such a privilege to be in this place to speak for the people of the lakes and dales of Cumbria. Cumbria is one of the most beautiful places on earth. It is also, on occasion, one of the wettest. It needs to be; how else could we keep the lakes, tarns, meres, waters, rivers and becks filled and flowing? Cumbria is home to two national parks and two world heritage sites, yet its waterways are shamefully often polluted by sewage discharges, and those discharges take place legally and without sanction. Our lakes and rivers are our natural treasures, yet water company bosses are degrading those natural treasures to keep a hold of their own treasure. Last year, the water companies made profits of £2.7 billion and paid out £27 million in bonuses. Their chief executives earn seven-figure sums, yet they are free by law to preside over enormous numbers of dangerous discharges that damage our environment and our wildlife, and are a threat to human life, too.

This Bill aims to stop the water companies putting their personal treasure ahead of our natural treasure. The Government choose to let them get away with it, but this Bill will stop them. In 2021, raw sewage was pumped into the River Lune near Sedbergh in my constituency for 5,351 hours—the equivalent of 222 continuous days. This is not just a problem for me and my constituents; it is a colossal crisis affecting the entire country. Water companies pumped sewage into rivers nationwide 772,000 times in the last two years—more than 1,000 discharges each day. Some of those discharges lasted almost a whole year, and all of them were legal. Sewage discharges happen far too frequently and for far too long for the Government and the water companies to be able to credibly hide behind the excuse that they are caused only by exceptional rainfall. As a result of these discharges, only 14% of England's rivers now meet the criteria to be defined as ecologically good.

It is true that our sewerage systems are shamelessly out of date, but the water companies responsible for improving them have little impetus to do so because the Government are barely holding them to account. The British public pay these companies to not just provide us with clean water, but ensure safe and clean processes for waste water and sewage. Too often, it feels as though the companies forget about half of that bargain, and this Government let them. United Utilities, our local water company in the north-west, was the culprit in four of the 10 longest sewage discharges in 2021—the most of any water company in the country. Meanwhile it posted profits of £602 million and dished out £6 million in bonuses—also the most of any water company in the

country. Far from being punished or held accountable for the degradation of our waterways, the water bosses, it appears to the public, are being rewarded for it. Those 772,000 discharges were legal. They happened under the Government's nose while the rest of us had to hold ours.

The water companies are also guilty of emissions that have broken the law, but they are rarely held to account. That is, of course, something of a theme for this Government. Between 2018 and 2021, only 11 fines were issued to water companies for pumping sewage into our lakes and rivers. Only three of those fines were over £1 million, and four were less than £50,000. The Government make it cheaper for water companies to pay a fine than to take action to stop the discharges. It is no wonder that the companies do not invest enough in cleaning up our lakes and rivers.

I can confirm that I left the lakes this morning without a coat, because spring is here. The visitors are with us in Cumbria, and summer is around the corner. The UK's waterways will soon be teeming with swimmers, dippers and paddlers, nowhere more so than in the English lakes and most of all Windermere, at the heart of the most visited part of the UK outside London. Windermere has three designated bathing sites, all of them ranked as being of good standard. It is currently a safe place to visit, but the Government's weak regulation is putting that at risk.

United Utilities legally dumped sewage into Windermere on 71 days in 2020. How can that be considered anything other than outrageous? The Government allow such discharges because they are considered to be storm events. Well, Cumbria has more rainfall in a month than many places have in a year. Things that might strike Ministers in London as storm events are actually mild drizzle for those of us in the lakes. By allowing the water companies to hide behind storm events as an excuse to pollute our lakes and rivers, the Government show their ignorance of communities such as ours in Cumbria and allow the water companies to pollute Britain's wettest places the worst.

Tourism and hospitality employs 60,000 people in Cumbria. It is by far our biggest employer, being worth £3.5 billion a year to our local economy. I do not want the Government to put that at risk by allowing our lakes to be polluted. I want them to protect the wellbeing of everyone who visits and lives in the lakes.

As well as the human impact, there is an ecological impact. Maintaining the quality of our rivers, streams and lakes is crucial to protecting biodiversity for centuries to come. The Environmental Audit Committee has reported that

“rivers in England are in a mess.”

The population of 39 of the 42 main salmon rivers in England are categorised as at risk or probably at risk. When one part of the complex interconnected life of a river is damaged, the whole ecosystem is hurt, from duckweed and dragonflies to otters and trout.

We must not be duped into thinking that the Government took action to deal with this in the Environment Act 2021. We remember they had to be dragged kicking and screaming by Members of the other place into moving an amendment, but that amendment is essentially meaningless. It sets no timescales or targets. It is a wish list, not an action plan.

[Tim Farron]

This Bill would put that right by ensuring that action is taken. It would provide for mandatory targets and timescales for the ending of sewage discharges into waterways and coastal areas. It would also strengthen Ofwat, the Water Services Regulation Authority, to hold water companies accountable. Furthermore, it would take the radical step of placing representatives of local environmental groups on the board of these companies so that executives have nowhere to hide from the impact of their practices on our waterways, on the wildlife that depends on them and on the economies and communities they underpin.

The Bill would also help to get to the heart of the problem, not just the headlines, by making sure we get the right information. The Government tell us how long discharges happen and how often they happen, but not the volume of sewage discharged into the watercourses. Without that information, we cannot know the scale of the problem. In small rivers and becks, or in the confined space of a lake, volume has a much bigger and more damaging impact on humans, animals and ecology.

Both the Government and the water companies hide behind asking inadequate questions, and therefore getting inadequate answers. For instance, the Government's Environment Agency has to test for nutrients and chemicals in the water, but it does not have to test for bacteria, yet bacteria are the greatest health concern. Unless a watercourse is designated as bathing water, and barely any rivers are designated as bathing water, bacteria is tested for only by concerned citizens such as the marvellous people I recently met on the River Kent in Staveley. Testing for bacteria must become compulsory.

The River Kent in Cumbria is designated as a site of special scientific interest. Among other things, it hosts protected species such as pearl mussels, which are rarer

than the giant panda, yet sewage is being legally discharged into this protected river almost every day.

The House can see why this Bill matters to my community and the whole United Kingdom. The Bill would require water companies to produce accurate and comprehensive quarterly reports on the impact of sewage discharges on animal welfare, human health and the environment. The public have a right to know what our water companies are being allowed to do. With the cleansing impact of public scrutiny, and the literally cleansing effect of water companies spending their money on upgrades rather than bonuses, hopefully the public will soon see encouraging signs to give them faith in our waterways and renewed faith in our political system that the polluters will actually be held to account for dumping sewage into our lakes and rivers, that they will no longer be permitted to do so, no matter how powerful they may be, and that companies making billions in profit will no longer be protected by a Conservative Government who permitted them to discharge sewage 772,000 times in two years.

What, then, shall we protect: the inflated profits of water companies, or the safety and beauty of our lakes and rivers? It is time for all of us in this House to take action and to pick a side.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Tim Farron, Ed Davey, Daisy Cooper, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Sarah Green, Wera Hobhouse, Christine Jardine, Layla Moran, Helen Morgan, Sarah Olney, Jamie Stone and Munira Wilson present the Bill.

Tim Farron accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May, and to be printed (Bill 303).

Online Safety Bill

[Relevant Documents: Report of the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill, Session 2021-22: Draft Online Safety Bill, HC 609, and the Government Response, CM 640; Eighth Report of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, The Draft Online Safety Bill and the legal but harmful debate, HC 1039, and the Government response HC 1221; Second Report of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Session 2019-21, Misinformation in the COVID-19 Infodemic, HC 234, and the Government response, HC 894; Second Report of the Petitions Committee, Tackling Online Abuse, HC 766, and the Government response, HC 1224; Eleventh Report of the Treasury Committee, Economic Crime, HC 145; e-petition 272087, Hold online trolls accountable for their online abuse via their IP address; e-petition 332315, Ban anonymous accounts on social media; e-petition 575833, Make verified ID a requirement for opening a social media account; e-petition 582423, Repeal Section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 and expunge all convictions; e-petition 601932, Do not restrict our right to freedom of expression online.]

Second Reading

7.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Given the time and the number of people indicating that they wish to speak, and given that we will have my speech, the shadow Minister's speech and the two winding-up speeches, there might be 10 minutes left for people to speak. I will therefore take only a couple of interventions and speak very fast in the way I can, being northern.

Almost every aspect of our lives is now conducted via the internet, from work and shopping to keeping up with our friends, family and worldwide real-time news. Via our smartphones and tablets, we increasingly spend more of our lives online than in the real world.

In the past 20 years or so, it is fair to say that the internet has overwhelmingly been a force for good, for prosperity and for progress, but Members on both sides of the House will agree that, as technology advances at warp speed, so have the new dangers this progress presents to children and young people.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that, last Wednesday, the man who murdered our great friend Sir David Amess was sentenced to a whole-life term. David felt very strongly that we need legislation to protect MPs, particularly female MPs, from vile misogynistic abuse. In his memory, will she assure me that her Bill will honour the spirit of that request?

Ms Dorries: Sir David was a friend to all of us, and he was very much at the forefront of my mind during the redrafting of this Bill over the last few months. I give my right hon. Friend my absolute assurance on that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): A number of constituents have contacted me over the last few months about eating disorders, particularly anorexia and bulimia, and about bullying in schools. Will the Secretary of

State assure me and this House that those concerns will be addressed by this Bill so that my constituents are protected?

Ms Dorries: They will. Inciting people to take their own life or encouraging eating disorders in anorexia chatrooms—all these issues are covered by the Bill.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms Dorries: I will take one more intervention.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, and I thank her for her written communications regarding Angela Stevens, the mother of Brett, who tragically took his own life having been coerced by some of these vile online sites. The Law Commission considered harmful online communications as part of the Bill's preparation, and one of its recommendations is to introduce a new offence of encouraging or assisting self-harm. I strongly urge my right hon. Friend to adopt that recommendation. Can she say more on that?

Ms Dorries: Yes. Exactly those issues will be listed in secondary legislation, under "legal but harmful". I will talk about that further in my speech, but "legal but harmful" focuses on some of the worst harmful behaviours. We are talking not about an arbitrary list, but about incitement to encourage people to take their own life and encouraging people into suicide chatrooms—behaviour that is not illegal but which is indeed harmful.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms Dorries: I am going to whizz through my speech now in order to allow people who have stayed and want to speak to do so.

As the Minister for mental health for two years, too often, I heard stories such as the one just highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis). We have all sat down with constituents and listened as the worst stories any parents could recount were retold: stories of how 14-year-old girls take their own life after being directed via harmful algorithms into a suicide chatroom; and of how a child has been bombarded with pro-anorexia content, or posts encouraging self-harm or cyber-bullying.

School bullying used to stop at the school gate. Today, it accompanies a child home, on their mobile phone, and is lurking in the bedroom waiting when they switch on their computer. It is the last thing a bullied child reads at night before they sleep and the first thing they see when they wake in the morning. A bullied child is no longer bullied in the playground on school days; they are bullied 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Childhood innocence is being stolen at the click of a button. One extremely worrying figure from 2020 showed that 80% of 12 to 15-year-olds had at least one potentially harmful online experience in the previous year.

We also see this every time a footballer steps on to the pitch, only to be subjected to horrific racism online, including banana and monkey emojis. As any female MP in this House will tell you, a woman on social media—I say this from experience—faces a daily barrage of toxic abuse. It is not criticism—criticism is a fair

[Ms Dorries]

game—but horrific harassment and serious threats of violence. Trolls post that they hope we get raped or killed, urge us to put a rope around our neck, or want to watch us burn in a car alive—my own particular experience.

All this behaviour is either illegal or, almost without exception, explicitly banned in a platform's terms and conditions. Commercially, it has to be. If a platform stated openly that it allowed such content on its sites, which advertisers, its financial lifeblood, would knowingly endorse and advertise on it? Which advertisers would do that? Who would openly use or allow their children to use sites that state that they allow illegal and harmful activity? None, I would suggest, and platforms know that. Yet we have almost come to accept this kind of toxic behaviour and abuse as part and parcel of online life. We have factored online abuse and harm into our daily way of life, but it should not and does not have to be this way.

This Government promised in their manifesto to pass legislation to tackle these problems and to make the UK the

“safest place in the world to be online”

especially for children. We promised legislation that would hold social media platforms to the promises they have made to their own users—their own stated terms and conditions—promises that too often are broken with no repercussions. We promised legislation that would bring some fundamental accountability to the online world. That legislation is here in the form of the groundbreaking Online Safety Bill. We are leading the way and free democracies across the globe are watching carefully to see how we progress this legislation.

The Bill has our children's future, their unhindered development and their wellbeing at its heart, while at the same time providing enhanced protections for freedom of speech. At this point, I wish to pay tribute to my predecessors, who have each trodden the difficult path of balancing freedom of speech and addressing widespread harms, including my immediate predecessor and, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), who worked so hard, prior to my arrival in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, with stakeholders and platforms, digging in to identify the scope of the problem.

Let me summarise the scope of the Bill. We have reserved our strongest measures in this legislation for children. For the first time, platforms will be required under law to protect children and young people from all sorts of harm, from the most abhorrent child abuse to cyber-bullying and pornography. Tech companies will be expected to use every possible tool to do so, including introducing age-assurance technologies, and they will face severe consequences if they fail in the most fundamental of requirements to protect children. The bottom line is that, by our passing this legislation, our youngest members of society will be far safer when logging on. I am so glad to see James Okulaja and Alex Holmes from The Diana Award here today, watching from the Gallery as we debate this groundbreaking legislation. We have worked closely with them as we have developed the legislation, as they have dedicated a huge amount of their time to protecting children from online harms. This Bill is for them and those children.

The second part of the Bill makes sure that platforms design their services to prevent them from being abused by criminals. When illegal content does slip through the net, such as child sex abuse and terrorist content, they will need to have effective systems and processes in place to quickly identify it and remove it from their sites. We will not allow the web to be a hiding place or a safe space for criminals. The third part seeks to force the largest social media platforms to enforce their own bans on racism, misogyny, antisemitism, pile-ons and all sorts of other unacceptable behaviour that they claim not to allow but that ruins life in practice. In other words, we are just asking the largest platforms to simply do what they say they will do, as we do in all good consumer protection measures in any other industry. If platforms fail in any of those basic responsibilities, Ofcom will be empowered to pursue a range of actions against them, depending on the situation, and, if necessary, to bring down the full weight of the law upon them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms Dorries: I will take just two more interventions and that will be it, otherwise people will not have a chance to speak.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. The internet giants that run the kind of awful practices that she has described have for too long been unaccountable, uncaring and unconscionable in the way they have fuelled every kind of spite and fed every kind of bigotry. Will she go further in this Bill and ensure that, rather like any other publisher, if those companies are prepared to allow anonymous posts, they are held accountable for those posts and subject to the legal constraints that a broadcaster or newspaper would face?

Ms Dorries: These online giants will be held accountable to their own terms and conditions. They will be unable any longer to allow illegal content to be published, and we will also be listing in secondary legislation offences that will be legal but harmful. We will be holding those tech giants to account.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. She talked about how this Bill is going to protect children much more, and it is a welcome step forward. However, does she accept that there are major gaps in this Bill? For instance, gaming is not covered. It is not clear whether things such as virtual reality and the metaverse are going to be covered. [Interruption.] It is not clear and all the experts will tell us that. The codes of practice in the Bill are only recommended guidance; they are not mandatory and binding on companies. That will encourage a race to the bottom.

Ms Dorries: The duties are mandatory; it is the Online Safety Bill and the metaverse is included in the Bill. Not only is it included, but, moving forward, the provisions in the Bill will allow us to move swiftly with the metaverse and other things. We did not even know that TikTok existed when this Bill started its journey. These provisions will allow us to move quickly to respond.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms Dorries: I will take one more intervention, but that is it.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. One of the most important national assets that needs protecting in this Bill and elsewhere is our reputation for serious journalism. Will she therefore confirm that, as she has said outside this House, she intends to table amendments during the passage of the Bill that will ensure that platforms and search engines that have strategic market status protect access to journalism and content from recognised news publishers, ensuring that it is not moderated, restricted or removed without notice or right of appeal, and that those news websites will be outside the scope of the Bill?

Ms Dorries: We have already done that—it is already in the Bill.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Ms Dorries: No, I have to continue.

Not only will the Bill protect journalistic content, democratic content and democratic free speech, but if one of the tech companies wanted to take down journalistic content, the Bill includes a right of appeal for journalists, which currently does not exist. We are doing further work on that to ensure that content remains online while the appeal takes place. The appeal process has to be robust and consistent across the board for all the appeals that take place. We have already done more work on that issue in this version of the Bill and we are looking to do more as we move forward.

As I have said, we will not allow the web to be a hiding place or safe space for criminals and when illegal content does slip through the net—such as child sex abuse and terrorist content—online platforms will need to have in place effective systems and processes to quickly identify that illegal content and remove it from their sites.

The third measure will force the largest social media platforms to enforce their own bans on racism, misogyny, antisemitism, pile-ons and all the other unacceptable behaviours. In other words, we are asking the largest platforms to do what they say they will do, just as happens with all good consumer-protection measures in any other industry. Should platforms fail in any of their basic responsibilities, Ofcom will be empowered to pursue a range of actions against them, depending on the situation, and, if necessary, to bring down upon them the full weight of the law. Such action includes searching platforms' premises and confiscating their equipment; imposing huge fines of up to 10% of their global turnover; pursuing criminal sanctions against senior managers who fail to co-operate; and, if necessary, blocking their sites in the UK.

We know that tech companies can act very quickly when they want to. Last year, when an investigation revealed that Pornhub allowed child sexual exploitation and abuse imagery to be uploaded to its platform, Mastercard and Visa blocked the use of their cards on the site. Lo and behold, threatened with the prospect of losing a huge chunk of its profit, Pornhub suddenly removed nearly 10 million child sexual exploitation videos from its site overnight. These companies have the

tools but, unfortunately, as they have shown time and again, they need to be forced to use them. That is exactly what the Bill will do.

Before I move on, let me point out something very important: this is not the same Bill as the one published in draft form last year. I know that Members throughout the House are as passionate as I am about getting this legislation right, and I had lots of constructive feedback on the draft version of the Bill. I have listened carefully to all that Members have had to say throughout the Bill's process, including by taking into account the detailed feedback from the Joint Committee, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee and the Petitions Committee. They have spent many hours considering every part of the Bill, and I am extremely grateful for their dedication and thorough recommendations on how the legislation could be improved.

As a result of that feedback process, over the past three months or so I have strengthened the legislation in a number of important ways. There were calls for cyber-flashing to be included; cyber-flashing is now in the Bill. There were calls to ensure that the legislation covered all commercial pornography sites; in fact, we have expanded the Bill's scope to include every kind of provider of pornography. There were concerns about anonymity, so we have strengthened the Bill so that it now requires the biggest tech platforms to offer verification and empowerment tools for adult users, allowing people to block anonymous trolls from the beginning.

I know that countless MPs are deeply concerned about how online fraud—particularly scam ads—has proliferated over the past few years. Under the new version of the Bill, the largest and highest-risk companies—those that stand to make the most profit—must tackle scam ads that appear on their services.

We have expanded the list of priority offences named on the face of the legislation to include not just terrorism and child abuse imagery but revenge porn, fraud, hate crime, encouraging and assisting suicide, and organised immigration crime, among other offences.

If anyone doubted our appetite to go after Silicon Valley executives who do not co-operate with Ofcom, they will see that we have strengthened the Bill so that the criminal sanctions for senior managers will now come into effect as soon as possible after Royal Assent—I am talking weeks, not years. We have expanded the things for which those senior managers will be criminally liable to cover falsifying data, destroying data and obstructing Ofcom's access to their premises.

In addition to the regulatory framework in the Bill that I have described, we are creating three new criminal offences. While the regulatory framework is focused on holding companies to account, the criminal offences will be focused on individuals and the way people use and abuse online communications. Recommended by the Law Commission, the offences will address coercive and controlling behaviour by domestic abusers; threats to rape, kill or inflict other physical violence; and the sharing of dangerous disinformation deliberately to inflict harm.

This is a new, stronger Online Safety Bill. It is the most important piece of legislation that I have ever worked on and it has been a huge team effort to get here. I am confident that we have produced something that will protect children and the most vulnerable members of society while being flexible and adaptable enough to meet the challenges of the future.

[Ms Dorries]

Let me make something clear in relation to freedom of speech. Anyone who has actually read the Bill will recognise that its defining focus is the tackling of serious harm, not the curtailing of free speech or the prevention of adults from being upset or offended by something they have seen online. In fact, along with countless others throughout the House, I am seriously concerned about the power that big tech has amassed over the past two decades and the huge influence that Silicon Valley now wields over public debate.

We in this place are not the arbiters of free speech. We have left it to unelected tech executives on the west coast to police themselves. They decide who is and who is not allowed on the internet. They decide whose voice should be heard and whose should be silenced—whose content is allowed up and what should be taken down. Too often, their decisions are arbitrary and inconsistent. We are left, then, with a situation in which the president of the United States can be banned by Twitter while the Taliban is not; in which talkRADIO can be banned by YouTube for 12 hours; in which an Oxford academic, Carl Heneghan, can be banned by Twitter; or in which an article in *The Mail on Sunday* can be plastered with a “fake news” label—all because they dared to challenge the west coast consensus or to express opinions that Silicon Valley does not like.

It is, then, vital that the Bill contains strong protections for free speech and for journalistic content. For the first time, under this legislation all users will have an official right to appeal if they feel their content has been unfairly removed. Platforms will have to explain themselves properly if they remove content and will have special new duties to protect journalistic content and democratically important content. They will have to keep those new duties in mind whenever they set their terms and conditions or moderate any content on their sites. I emphasise that the protections are new. The new criminal offences update section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988 and section 127 of the Communications Act 2003, which were so broad that they interfered with free speech while failing to address seriously harmful consequences.

Without the Bill, social media companies would be free to continue to arbitrarily silence or cancel those with whom they do not agree, without any need for explanation or justification. That situation should be intolerable for anyone who values free speech. For those who quite obviously have not read the Bill and say that it concedes power to big tech companies, I have this to say: those big tech companies have all the power in the world that they could possibly want, right now. How much more power could we possibly concede?

That brings me to my final point. We now face two clear options. We could choose not to act and leave big tech to continue to regulate itself and mark its own homework, as it has been doing for years with predictable results. We have already seen that too often, without the right incentives, tech companies will not do what is needed to protect their users. Too often, their claims about taking steps to fix things are not backed up by genuine actions.

I can give countless examples from the past two months alone of tech not taking online harm and abuse seriously, wilfully promoting harmful algorithms or putting profit before people. A recent BBC investigation

showed that women’s intimate pictures were being shared across the platform Telegram to harass, shame and blackmail women. The BBC reported 100 images to Telegram as pornography, but 96 were still accessible a month later. Tech did not act.

Twitter took six days to suspend the account of rapper Wiley after his disgusting two-day antisemitic rant. Just last week, the Centre for Countering Digital Hate said that it had reported 253 accounts to Instagram as part of an investigation into misogynistic abuse on the platform, but almost 90% remained active a month later. Again, tech did not act.

Remember: we have been debating these issues for years. They were the subject of one of my first meetings in this place in 2005. During that time, things have got worse, not better. If we choose the path of inaction, it will be on us to explain to our constituents why we did nothing to protect their children from preventable risks, such as grooming, pornography, suicide content or cyber-bullying. To those who say protecting children is the responsibility of parents, not the job of the state, I would quote the 19th-century philosopher John Stuart Mill, one of the staunchest defenders of individual freedom. He wrote in “On Liberty” that the role of the state was to fulfil the responsibility of the parent in order to protect a child where a parent could not. If we choose not to act, in the years to come we will no doubt ask ourselves why we did not act to impose fundamental online protections.

However, we have another option. We can pass this Bill and take huge steps towards tackling some of the most serious forms of online harm: child abuse, terrorism, harassment, death threats, and content that is harming children across the UK today. We could do what John Stuart Mill wrote was the core duty of Government. The right to self-determination is not unlimited. An action that results in doing harm to another is not only wrong, but wrong enough that the state can intervene to prevent that harm from occurring. We do that in every other part of our life. We erect streetlamps to make our cities and towns safer. We put speed limits on our roads and make seatbelts compulsory. We make small but necessary changes to protect people from grievous harm. Now it is time to bring in some fundamental protections online.

We have the legislation ready right now in the form of the Online Safety Bill. All we have to do is pass it. I am proud to commend the Bill to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the shadow Secretary of State, it will be obvious to the House that we have approximately one hour for Back-Bench contributions and that a great many people want to speak. I warn colleagues that not everybody will have the opportunity and that there will certainly be a time limit, which will probably begin at five minutes.

8.2 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It has been a busy day, and I will try to keep my remarks short. It is a real

shame that the discussion of an important landmark Bill, with so many Members wanting to contribute, has been squeezed into such a tiny amount of time.

Labour supports the principles of the Online Safety Bill. There has been a wild west online for too long. Huge platforms such as Facebook and Google began as start-ups but now have huge influence over almost every aspect of our lives: how we socialise and shop, where we get our news and views, and even the outcomes of elections and propaganda wars. There have been undoubted benefits, but the lack of regulation has let harms and abuses proliferate. From record reports of child abuse to soaring fraud and scams, from racist tweets to Russia's disinformation campaigns, there are too many harms that, as a society, we have been unable or unwilling to address.

There is currently no regulator. However, neither the Government nor silicon valley should have control over what we can say and do online. We need strong, independent regulation.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Lucy Powell: I will give way once on this point.

Dan Carden: I am grateful. The Secretary of State talked about getting the tech giants to follow their own rules, but we know from Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistleblower, that companies were driving children and adults to harmful content, because it increased engagement. Does that not show that we must go even further than asking them to follow their own rules?

Lucy Powell: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, and I will come on to talk about that shortly.

The Online Safety Bill is an important step towards strong, independent regulation. We welcome the Bill's overall aim: the duty of care framework based on the work of the Carnegie Trust. I agree with the Secretary of State that the safety of children should be at the heart of this regulation. The Government have rightly now included fraud, online pornography and cyber-flashing in the new draft of the Bill, although they should have been in scope all along.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lucy Powell: I am not going to give way, sorry.

Before I get onto the specifics, I will address the main area of contention: the balance between free speech and regulation, most notably expressed via the "legal but harmful" clauses.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Lucy Powell: I will give way one last time.

Christian Wakeford: I thank my hon. Friend. The Government have set out the priority offences in schedule 7 to the Bill, but legal harms have clearly not been specified. Given the torrent of racist, antisemitic and misogynistic abuse that grows every single day, does my hon. Friend know why the Bill has not been made more cohesive with a list of core legal harms, allowing for emerging threats to be dealt with in secondary legislation?

Lucy Powell: I will come on to some of those issues. My hon. Friend makes a valid point.

I fear the Government's current solution to the balance between free speech and regulation will please no one and takes us down an unhelpful rabbit hole. Some believe the Bill will stifle free speech, with platforms over-zealously taking down legitimate political and other views. In response, the Government have put in what they consider to be protections for freedom of speech and have committed to setting out an exhaustive list of "legal but harmful" content, thus relying almost entirely on a "take down content" approach, which many will still see as Government overreach.

On the other hand, those who want harmful outcomes addressed through stronger regulation are left arguing over a yet-to-be-published list of Government-determined harmful content. This content-driven approach moves us in the wrong direction away from the "duty of care" principles the Bill is supposed to enshrine. The real solution is a systems approach based on outcomes, which would not only solve the free speech question, but make the Bill overall much stronger.

What does that mean in practice? Essentially, rather than going after individual content, go after the business models, systems and policies that drive the impact of such harms—[*Interruption.*] The Minister for Security and Borders, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), says from a sedentary position that that is what the Bill does, but none of the leading experts in the field think the same. He should talk to some of them before shouting at me.

The business models of most social media companies are currently based on engagement, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) outlined. The more engagement, the more money they make, which rewards controversy, sensationalism and fake news. A post containing a racist slur or anti-vax comment that nobody notices, shares or reads is significantly less harmful than a post that is quickly able to go viral. A collective pile-on can have a profoundly harmful effect on the young person on the receiving end, even though most of the individual posts would not meet the threshold of harmful.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Lucy Powell: I will not, sorry. Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen, who I had the privilege of meeting, cited many examples to the Joint Committee on the draft Online Safety Bill of Facebook's models and algorithms making things much worse. Had the Government chosen to follow the Joint Committee recommendations for a systems-based approach rather than a content-driven one, the Bill would be stronger and concerns about free speech would be reduced.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry, but too many people want to speak. Members should talk to their business managers, who have cut—[*Interruption.*] I know the hon. Gentleman was Chair of the Committee—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady is not giving way. Let us get on with the debate.

Lucy Powell: The business managers have failed everybody on both sides given the time available.

A systems-based approach also has the benefit of tackling the things that platforms can control, such as how content spreads, rather than what they cannot control, such as what people post. We would avoid the cul-de-sac of arguing over the definitions of what content is or is not harmful, and instead go straight to the impact. I urge the Government to adopt the recommendations that have been made consistently to focus the Bill on systems and models, not simply on content.

Turning to other aspects of the Bill, key issues with its effectiveness remain. The first relates to protecting children. As any parent will know, children face significant risks online, from poor body image, bullying and sexist trolling to the most extreme grooming and child abuse, which is, tragically, on the rise. This Bill is an important opportunity to make the internet a safe place for children. It sets out duties on platforms to prevent children from encountering illegal, harmful or pornographic content. That is all very welcome.

However, despite some of the Government's ambitious claims, the Bill still falls short of fully protecting children. As the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children argues, the Government have failed to grasp the dynamics of online child abuse and grooming—*[Interruption.]* Again, I am being heckled from the Front Bench, but if Ministers engage with the children's charities they will find a different response. For example—*[Interruption.]* Yes, but they are not coming out in support of the Bill, are they? For example, it is well evidenced that abusers will often first interact with children on open sites and then move to more encrypted platforms. The Government should require platforms to collaborate to reduce harm to children, prevent abuse from being displaced and close loopholes that let abusers advertise to each other in plain sight.

The second issue is illegal activity. We can all agree that what is illegal offline should be illegal online, and all platforms will be required to remove illegal content such as terrorism, child sex abuse and a range of other serious offences. It is welcome that the Government have set out an expanded list, but they can and must go further. Fraud was the single biggest crime in the UK last year, yet the Business Secretary dismissed it as not affecting people's everyday lives.

The approach to fraud in this Bill has been a bit like the hokey-cokey: the White Paper said it was out, then it was in, then it was out again in the draft Bill and finally it is in again, but not for the smaller sites or the search services. The Government should be using every opportunity to make it harder for scammers to exploit people online, backed up by tough laws and enforcement. What is more, the scope of this Bill still leaves out too many of the Law Commission's recommendations of online crimes.

The third issue is disinformation. The war in Ukraine has unleashed Putin's propaganda machine once again. That comes after the co-ordinated campaign by Russia to discredit the truth about the Sergei Skripal poisonings. Many other groups have watched and learned: from

covid anti-vaxxers to climate change deniers, the internet is rife with dangerous disinformation. The Government have set up a number of units to tackle disinformation and claim to be working with social media companies to take it down. However, that is opaque and far from optimal. The only mention of disinformation in the Bill is that a committee should publish a report. That is far from enough.

Returning to my earlier point, it is the business models and systems of social media companies that create a powerful tool for disinformation and false propaganda to flourish. Being a covid vaccine sceptic is one thing, but being able to quickly share false evidence dressed up as science to millions of people within hours is a completely different thing. It is the power of the platform that facilitates that, and it is the business models that encourage it. This Bill hardly begins to tackle those societal and democratic harms.

The fourth issue is online abuse. From racism to incels, social media has become a hotbed for hate. I agree with the Secretary of State that that has poisoned public life. I welcome steps to tackle anonymous abuse. However, we still do not know what the Government will designate as legal but harmful, which makes it very difficult to assess whether the Bill goes far enough, or indeed too far. I worry that those definitions are left entirely to the Secretary of State to determine. A particularly prevalent and pernicious form of online hate is misogyny, but violence against women and girls is not mentioned at all in the Bill—a serious oversight.

The decision on which platforms will be regulated by the Bill is also arbitrary and flawed. Only the largest platforms will be required to tackle harmful content, yet smaller platforms, which can still have a significant, highly motivated, well-organised and particularly harmful user base, will not. Ofcom should regulate based on risk, not just on size.

The fifth issue is that the regulator and the public need the teeth to take on the big tech companies, with all the lawyers they can afford. It is a David and Goliath situation. The Bill gives Ofcom powers to investigate companies and fine them up to 10% of their turnover, and there are some measures to help individual users. However, if bosses in Silicon Valley are to sit up and take notice of this Bill, it must go further. It should include stronger criminal liability, protections for whistleblowers, a meaningful ombudsman for individuals, and a route to sue companies through the courts.

The final issue is future-proofing, which we have heard something about already. This Bill is a step forward in dealing with the likes of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram—although it must be said that many companies have already begun to get their house in order ahead of any legislation—but it will have taken nearly six years for the Bill to appear on the statute book.

Since the Bill was first announced, TikTok has emerged on the scene, and Facebook has renamed itself Meta. The metaverse is already posing dangers to children, with virtual reality chat rooms allowing them to mix freely with predatory adults. Social media platforms are also adapting their business models to avoid regulation; Twitter, for example, says that it will decentralise and outsource moderation. There is a real danger that when the Bill finally comes into effect, it will already be out of date. A duty of care approach, focused on outcomes

rather than content, would create a much more dynamic system of regulation, able to adapt to new technologies and platforms.

In conclusion, social media companies are now so powerful and pervasive that regulating them is long overdue. Everyone agrees that the Bill should reduce harm to children and prevent illegal activity online, yet there are serious loopholes, as I have laid out. Most of all, the focus on individual content rather than business models, outcomes and algorithms will leave too many grey areas and black spots, and will not satisfy either side in the free speech debate.

Despite full prelegislative scrutiny, the Government have been disappointingly reluctant to accept those bigger recommendations. In fact, they are going further in the wrong direction. As the Bill progresses through the House, we will work closely with Ministers to improve and strengthen it, to ensure that it truly becomes a piece of world-leading legislation.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We will begin with a time limit of five minutes, but that is likely to reduce.

8.16 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Some colleagues have been in touch with me to ask my view on one overriding matter relating to this Bill: does it impinge on our civil liberties and our freedom of speech? I say to colleagues that it does neither, and I will explain how I have come to that conclusion.

In the mid-1990s, when social media and the internet were in their infancy, the forerunners of the likes of Google scored a major win in the United States. Effectively, they got the US Congress to agree to the greatest “get out of jail free” card in history: namely, to agree that social media platforms are not publishers and are not responsible for the content they carry. That has led to a huge flowering of debate, knowledge sharing and connections between people, the likes of which humanity has never seen before. We should never lose sight of that in our drive to fairly regulate this space. However, those platforms have also been used to cause great harm in our society, and because of their “get out of jail free” card, the platforms have not been accountable to society for the wrongs that are committed through them.

That is quite simplistic. I emphasise that as time has gone by, social media platforms have to some degree recognised that they have responsibilities, and that the content they carry is not without impact on society—the very society that they make their profits from, and that nurtured them into existence. Content moderation has sprung up, but it has been a slow process. It is only a few years ago that Google, a company whose turnover is higher than the entire economy of the Netherlands, was spending more on free staff lunches than on content moderation.

Content moderation is decided by algorithms, based on terms and conditions drawn up by the social media companies without any real public input. That is an inadequate state of affairs. Furthermore, where platforms have decided to act, there has been little accountability, and there can be unnecessary takedowns, as well as harmful content being carried. Is that democratic? Is it transparent? Is it right?

These masters of the online universe have a huge amount of power—more than any industrialist in our history—without facing any form of public scrutiny, legal framework or, in the case of unwarranted takedowns, appeal. I am pleased that the Government have listened in part to the recommendations published by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, in particular on Parliament’s being given control through secondary legislation over legal but harmful content and its definition—an important safeguard for this legislation. However, the Committee and I still have queries about some of the Bill’s content. Specifically, we are concerned about the risks of cross-platform grooming and breadcrumbing—perpetrators using seemingly innocuous content to trap a child into a sequence of abuse. We also think that it is a mistake to focus on category 1 platforms, rather than extending the provisions to other platforms such as Telegram, which is a major carrier of disinformation. We need to recalibrate to a more risk-based approach, rather than just going by the numbers. These concerns are shared by charities such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, as the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) said.

On a systemic level, consideration should be given to allowing organisations such as the Internet Watch Foundation to identify where companies are failing to meet their duty of care, in order to prevent Ofcom from being influenced and captured by the heavy lobbying of the tech industry. There has been reference to the lawyers that the tech industry will deploy. If we look at any newspaper or LinkedIn, we see that right now, companies are recruiting, at speed, individuals who can potentially outgun regulation. It would therefore be sensible to bring in outside elements to provide scrutiny, and to review matters as we go forward.

On the culture of Ofcom, there needs to be greater flexibility. Simply reacting to a large number of complaints will not suffice. There needs to be direction and purpose, particularly with regard to the protection of children. We should allow for some forms of user advocacy at a systemic level, and potentially at an individual level, where there is extreme online harm.

On holding the tech companies to account, I welcome the sanctions regime and having named individuals at companies who are responsible. However, this Bill gives us an opportunity to bring about real culture change, as has happened in financial services over the past two decades. During Committee, the Government should actively consider the suggestion put forward by my Committee—namely, the introduction of compliance officers to drive safety by design in these companies.

Finally, I have concerns about the definition of “news publishers”. We do not want Ofcom to be effectively a regulator or a licensing body for the free press. However, I do not want in any way to do down this important and improved Bill. I will support it. It is essential. We must have this regulation in place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call John Nicolson.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I was under the impression that I was to wind up for my party, rather than speaking at this juncture.

Madam Deputy Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman would prefer to save his slot until later—

John Nicolson: I would, Madam Deputy Speaker, if that is all right with you.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Then we shall come to that arrangement. I call Dame Margaret Hodge.

8.22 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope that I will take only three minutes.

The human cost of abuse on the internet is unquantifiable—from self-harm to suicide, grooming to child abuse, and racism to misogyny. A space we thought gave the unheard a legitimate voice has become a space where too many feel forced to stay offline. As a Jewish female politician online, I have seen my identities perversely tied together to discredit my character and therefore silence my voice. I am regularly accused of being a “Zionist hag”, a “paedophile” and a “Nazi”. But this is not just about politicians. We all remember the tsunami of racism following the Euros, and we know women are targeted more online than men. Social media firms will not tackle this because their business model encourages harmful content. Nasty content attracts more traffic; more traffic brings more advertising revenue; and more revenue means bigger profits. Legislation is necessary to make the social media firms act. However, this Bill will simply gather dust if Ofcom and the police remain underfunded. The “polluter pays” principle—that is, securing funding through a levy on the platforms—would be much fairer than taxpayers picking up the bill for corporate failures.

I cherish anonymity for whistleblowers and domestic violence victims—it is vital—but when it is used as a cloak to harm others, it should be challenged. The Government’s halfway measure allows users to choose to block anonymous posts by verifying their own identity. That ignores police advice not to block abusive accounts, as those accounts help to identify genuine threats to individuals, and it ignores the danger of giving platforms the power to verify identities. We should think about the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Surely a third party with experience in unique identification should carry out checks on users. Then we all remain anonymous to platforms, but can be traced by law enforcement if found guilty of harmful abuse. We can then name and shame offenders.

On director liability, fines against platforms become a business cost and will not change behaviour, so personal liability is a powerful deterrent. However, enforcing this liability only when a platform fails to supply information to Ofcom is feeble. Directors must be made liable for breaching safety duties.

Finally, as others have said, most regulations apply only to category 1 platforms. Search engines fall through the cracks; BitChute, Gab, 4chan—all escape, but as we saw in the attacks on Pittsburgh’s synagogue and Christchurch’s mosque, all these platforms helped to foster those events. Regulation must be based on risk, not size. Safety should be embedded in any innovative products, so concern about over-regulating innovation is misplaced. This is the beginning of a generational

change. I am grateful to Ministers, because I do think they have listened. If they continue to listen, we can make Britain the safest place online.

8.26 pm

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): This Bill is a groundbreaking piece of legislation, and we are one of the first countries to attempt to bring in controls over content online. I therefore share the view of the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) that it is a great pity that its Second Reading was scheduled for a day when there is so much other business.

The Bill has been a long time in the preparation. I can remember chairing an inquiry of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in 2008 on the subject of harmful content online. Since then, we have had a Green Paper, a White Paper, a consultation, a draft Bill, a Joint Committee, and several more Select Committee inquiries. It is important that we get this right, and the Bill has grown steadily, as the Secretary of State outlined. I do not need to add to the reasons why it is important that we control content and protect vulnerable people from online content that is harmful to them.

There are two areas where I want to express a word of caution. First, as the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), is very much aware, the Government have an ambition to make the United Kingdom the tech capital of the world. We have been incredibly successful in attracting investment. He will know better than I that the tech industry in Britain is now worth over \$1 trillion, and that we have over 100 unicorns, but the Bill creates uncertainty, mainly because so much is subject to secondary legislation and not spelled out in detail in the Bill. This will stifle innovation and growth.

It is fairly obvious which are the main companies that will fall into the category 1 definition. We are told that there may be some 15 to 20. Some of them are certainly obvious. However, I share the view that this needs to be determined more by risk than by reach. A company does not necessarily pose a significant risk simply because it is large. Companies such as Tripadvisor, eBay and Airbnb, which, on the size criteria, might fall within scope of category 1, should not do so. I hope that the Secretary of State and the Minister can say more about the precise definitions that will determine categories. This is more serious for the category 2 companies; it is estimated that some 25,000 may fall within scope. It is not clear precisely what the obligations on them will be, and that too is causing a degree of uncertainty. It is also unclear whether some parts of a large company with several businesses, such as Amazon, would be in category 1 or category 2, or what would happen if companies grow. Could they, for instance, be re-categorised from 1 to 2? These concerns are being raised by the tech industry, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will continue to talk to techUK, to allay those fears.

The second issue, as has been rightly identified, is the effect on freedom of speech. As has been described, tech platforms already exercise censorship. At the moment, they exercise their own judgment as to what is permissible and what is not, and we have had examples such as YouTube taking down the talkRadio channel. I spent a great deal of time talking to the press and media about the special protections that journalism needs, and I

welcome the progress that has been made in the Bill. It is excellent that journalistic content will be put in a special category. I repeat the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green). The Secretary of State made some very welcome comments on, I think, “This Morning” about the introduction of an additional protection so that, if a journalist’s shared content were removed from an online platform, they would need to be informed and able to appeal. That may require additional amendments to the Bill, so perhaps the Minister could say when we are likely to see those.

There is also the concern raised by the periodical publishers that specialist magazines appear to be outside the protection of journalistic content. I hope that that can be addressed, because there are publications that deserve the same level of protection.

There is a wider concern about freedom of speech. The definition “legal but harmful” raises real concerns, particularly given that it is left open to subsequent secondary legislation to set out exactly what the categories will be. There are also widespread concerns that we need to avoid, at all costs, setting a precedent that may be used by others who are more keen to censor discussion online. In particular, clause 103(2)(b) relates to messaging services and can require Ofcom to use accredited technology to identify CSEA material. The Minister will be aware that that matter is also causing concern.

8.31 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): In the interest of time, I will just pose a number of questions, which I hope the Minister might address in summing up. The first is about the scope of the Bill. The Joint Committee of which I was a member recommended that the age-appropriate design code, which is very effectively used by the Information Commissioner, be used as a benchmark in the Bill, so that any services accessed or likely to be accessed by children are regulated for safety. I do not understand why the Government rejected that suggestion, and I would be pleased to hear from the Minister why they did so.

Secondly, the Bill delegates lots of detail to statutory instruments, codes of practice from the regulator, or later decisions by the Secretary of State. Parliament must see that detail before the Bill becomes an Act. Will the Minister commit to those delegated decisions being published before the Bill becomes an Act? Could he explain why the codes of practice are not being set as mandatory? I do not understand why codes of practice, much of the detail of which the regulator is being asked to set, will not be made mandatory for businesses. How can minimum standards for age or identity verification be imposed if those codes of practice are not made mandatory? Perhaps the Minister could explain.

Many users across the country will want to ensure that their complaints are dealt with effectively. We recommended an ombudsman service that dealt with complaints that were exhausted through a complaints system at the regulated companies, but the Government rejected it. Please could the Minister explain why?

I was pleased that the Government accepted the concept of the ability for a super-complaint to be brought on behalf of groups of users, but the decision as to who will be able to bring a super-complaint has been deferred, subject to a decision by the Secretary of

State. Why, and when will that decision be taken? If the Minister could allude to who they might be, I am sure that would be welcome.

Lastly, there is a number of exemptions and more work to be done, which leaves significant holes in the legislation. There is much more work to be done on clauses 5, 6 and 50—on democratic importance, journalism and the definition of journalism, on the exemptions for news publishers, and on disinformation, which is mentioned only once in the entire Bill. I and many others recognise that these are not easy issues, but they should be considered fully before legislation is proposed that has gaping holes for people who want to get around it, and for those who wish to test the parameters of this law in the courts, probably for many years. All of us, on a cross-party basis in this House, support the Government’s endeavours to make it safe for children and others to be online. We want the legislation to be implemented as quickly as possible and to be as effective as possible, but there are significant concerns that it will be jammed up in the judicial system, where this House is unacceptably giving judges the job of fleshing out the definition of what many of the important exemptions will mean in practice.

The idea that the Secretary of State has the power to intervene with the independent regulator and tell it what it should or should not do obviously undermines the idea of an independent regulator. While Ministers might give assurances to this House that the power will not be abused, I believe that other countries, whether China, Russia, Turkey or anywhere else, will say, “Look at Great Britain. It thinks this is an appropriate thing to do. We’re going to follow the golden precedent set by the UK in legislating on these issues and give our Ministers the ability to decide what online content should be taken down.” That seems a dangerous precedent.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp) *indicated dissent.*

Darren Jones: The Minister is shaking his head, but I can tell him that the legislation does do that, because we looked at this and took evidence on it. The Secretary of State would be able to tell the regulator that content should be “legal but harmful” and therefore should be removed as part of its systems design online. We also heard that the ability to do that at speed is very restricted and therefore the power is ineffective in the first place. Therefore, the Government should evidently change their position on that. I do not understand why, in the face of evidence from pretty much every stakeholder, the Government agree that that is an appropriate use of power or why Parliament would vote that through.

I look forward to the Minister giving his answers to those questions, in the hope that, as the Bill proceeds through the House, it can be tidied up and made tighter and more effective, to protect children and adults online in this country.

8.35 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): This is an incredibly important Bill. It has huge cross-party support and was subject to scrutiny by the Joint Committee, which produced a unanimous report, which shows the widespread feeling in both Houses and on both sides of this Chamber that we should legislate. I do feel, though, that I should respond to some of the remarks of the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), on the Joint Committee report.

[Damian Collins]

I agree with the hon. Member that, unless this legislation covers the systems of social media companies as well as the content hosted, it will not be effective, but it is my belief that it does that. Throughout the evidence that the Committee took, including from Ofcom and not just the Government, it was stated to us very clearly that the systems of social media companies are within scope and that, in preparing the risk registers for the companies, Ofcom can look at risks. For Facebook, that could include the fact that the news feed recommends content to users, while for someone on TikTok using For You, it could be the fact that the company is selecting—algorithmically ranking—content that someone might like. That could include, for a teenage girl, content that promoted self-harm that was being actively recommended by the company's systems, or, as Frances Haugen set out, extremist content and hate speech being actively promoted and recommended by the systems.

That would be in scope. The algorithms are within scope, and part of Parliament job's will be to ensure on an ongoing basis that Ofcom is using its powers to audit the companies in that way, to gain access to information in that way, and to say that the active promotion of regulated content by a social media company is an offence. In passing this Bill, we expect that that will be fully in scope. If the legislation placed no obligation on a company to proactively identify any copies of content that it had judged should not be there and had taken down, we would have a very ineffective system. In effect, we would have what Facebook does to assess content today. If that was effective, we would not need this legislation, but it is woefully ineffective, so the algorithms and the systems are in scope. The Bill gives Ofcom the power to regulate on that basis, and we have to ensure that it does that in preparing the risk registers.

Following what my Joint Committee colleague, the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), said, the point about the codes of practice is really important. The regulator sets the codes of practice for companies to follow. The Government set out in their response to the Joint Committee report that the regulator can tell companies if their response is not adequate. If an area of risk has been identified where the company has to create policies to address that risk and the response is not good enough, the regulator can still find the company in breach. I would welcome it if the Minister wished to say more about that, either today or as the Bill goes through the House, because it is really important. The response of a company to a request from the regulator, having identified a risk on its platforms, cannot be: "Oh, sorry, we don't have a policy on that." It has to be able to set those policies. We have to go beyond just enforcing the terms of service that companies have created for themselves. Making sure they do what they say they are going to do is really important, as the Secretary of State said, but we should be able to push them to go further.

I agree, though, with the hon. Member for Manchester Central and other hon. Members about regulation being based on risk and not just size. In reality, Ofcom will have to make judgment calls on smaller sites that are posing a huge risk or a new risk that has been identified.

The regulator will have the power to regulate metaverse and VR platforms. Anything that is a user-to-user service is already in scope of the legislation. The challenge for

the regulator will be in moderating conversations between two people in a virtual room, which is much harder than when people are posting text-based content. The technology will have to adapt to do that, but we should start that journey based on the fact that that is already in scope.

Finally, on the much used expression "legal but harmful", I am pleased the Government took one of our big recommendations, which is to write more offences clearly into the Bill, so it is clear what is actually being regulated—so promotion of self-harm is regulated content and hate speech is part of the regulated content. The job of the regulator then is to set the threshold where intervention should come and I think that should be based on case law. On many of these issues, such as the abuse of the England footballers after the final of the European championships, people have been sentenced in court for what they did. That creates good guidance and a good baseline for what hate speech is in that context and where we would expect intervention. I think it would be much easier for the Bill, the service users that are regulated and the people who post content, to know what the offences are and where the regulatory standard is. Rather than describing those things as "legal but harmful", we should describe them as what they are, which is regulated offences based on existing offences in law.

The Government made an important step in responding to say that the Government, in seeking amendment to the codes of practice that bring new offences within scope of these priority areas of harm, should have to go through an affirmative process in both Houses. That is really important. Ultimately, the regulation should be based on our laws and changes should be based on decisions taken in this House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. After the next speaker, the time limit will be reduced to four minutes.

8.40 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I want to focus on how people actually use the internet, particularly how young people actually use the internet. I feel, as was suggested in one of the comments in questions earlier, that this Bill and some of the discussion around it misses some of the point and some of the actual ways in which particularly young people use the internet.

We have not mentioned, or I have not heard anyone mention, Discord. I have not heard anyone mention Twitch. I have not heard people talking about how people interact on Fortnite. A significant number of young people use Fortnite to interact with their friends. That is the way they speak to their friends. I do not know if the Minister is aware of this, but you can only change the parental controls on Fortnite to stop your children speaking to everybody; you cannot stop them speaking to everybody but their friends. There are no parental controls on a lot of these sites that parents can adequately utilise. They only have this heavy-handed business where they can ban their child entirely from

doing something, or they are allowed to do everything. I think some bits are missed in this because it does not actually reflect the way young people use the internet.

In the girls' attitude survey produced by Girlguiding, 71% of the 2,000 girls who were surveyed said that they had experienced harmful content while online. But one of the important things I also want to stress is that a quarter of LGBQ and disabled girls found online forums and spaces an important source of support. So we need to make sure that children and young people have the ability to access those sources of support. Whether that is on forums, or on Fortnite, Minecraft, Animal Crossing or whatever it is they happen to be speaking to their friends on, that is important and key in order for young people to continue to communicate. It has been especially important during the pandemic.

There is at this moment a major parenting knowledge gap. There is a generation of parents who have not grown up using the internet. I was one of the first people to grow up using the internet and have kids; they are at the top end of primary school now. Once this generation of kids are adults, they will know how their children are behaving online and what the online world is like because they will have lived through it themselves. The current generation of parents has not. The current generation of parents has this knowledge gap.

I am finding that a lot of my kids' friends have rules that I consider totally—totally—unacceptable and inappropriate because they do not match how kids actually use the internet and the interactions they are likely to have on there. I asked my kids what they thought was the most important thing, and they said the ability to choose what they see and what they do not see, and who they hear from and who they do not hear from. That was the most important thing to them.

That has been talked about in a lot of the information we have received—the requirement to look at algorithms and to opt in to being served with those algorithms, rather than having an opt-out, as we do with Facebook. Facebook says, “Are you sure you don't want to see this content any more?” Well, yes, I have clicked that I do not want to see it—of course I do not want to see it any more. Of course I would like to see the things my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) posts and all of the replies he sends to people—I want that to pop up with my notifications—but I should have to choose to do that.

Kids feel like that as well—my kids, and kids up and down the country—because, as has been talked about, once you get into these cycles of seeing inappropriate, harmful, damaging content, you are more likely to be served with more and more of that content. At the very first moment people should be able to say, “Hang on, I don't want to see any of this”, and when they sign up to a site they should immediately be able to say, “No, I don't want to see any of this. All I want to do is speak to the people I know or have sent a friend request to and accepted a friend request from.” We need to ensure that there are enough safeguards like that in place for children and young people and their parents to be able to make those choices in the knowledge and understanding of how these services will actually be used, rather than MPs who do not necessarily use these services making these decisions. We need to have that flexibility.

My final point is that the internet is moving and changing. Twenty years ago I was going to LAN parties and meeting people I knew from online games. That is still happening today and we are only now getting the legislation here and catching up. It has taken that long for us to get here so this legislation must be fit for the future. It must be flexible enough to work with the new technologies, social media and gaming platforms that are coming through.

8.45 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I, too, regret the short time we have to debate this important Bill this evening. This is much-needed legislation and I agree with many of the comments already made.

These platforms have been warned over the years to take action yet have failed to do so. Their online platforms have remained a safe space for racism, holocaust denial, homophobia, conspiracy theories and general bullying. One of the best things I ever did for my mental health was to leave Twitter, but for many young people that is not an option as it cuts them off from access to their friends and much of what is their society. So I am proud that the Government are taking action on this but, as the Minister knows from my meetings with him alongside the Antisemitism Policy Trust, there are ways in which I think the Bill can be improved.

First, on small, high-harm platforms, I pay tribute to the Antisemitism Policy Trust, which has been leading the charge. As the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said, everybody knows Facebook, Twitter and YouTube but few people are aware of a lot of the smaller platforms such as BitChute, 8kun—previously 8chan—or Minds. These small platforms are a haven for white supremacists, incels, conspiracy theorists and antisemites; it is where they gather, converse and share and spew their hate.

An example of that is a post from the so-called anti-Jewish meme repository on the platform Gab which showed a picture of goblins, in this instance the usual grotesque representation of those age-old Jewish physical stereotypes, alongside the phrase, “Are you ready to die in another Jewish war, Goyim?” That is the sort of stuff that is on these small platforms, and it is not rare; we see it all over. Indeed, many of these small platforms exist purely to spew such hate, but at present, despite the many measures in the Bill that I support, these sites will be sifted by Ofcom into two major categories based on their size and functionality. I met the Minister to discuss this point recently.

The Government have not so far been enthusiastic about risk being a determinant factor for fear that too many of the small platforms would be drawn into scope. That is why I hope that as this Bill progresses the Minister will consider a small amendment to enable Ofcom to have powers to draw the small but high-harm platforms, based on its assessments—the so-called super-complaints that we have heard about or other means—into the category 1 status. That would add a regulatory oversight and burden on those platforms. This is all about putting pressure on them—requiring them to go through more hurdles to frustrate their business model of hate, and making it as uncomfortable as possible for them. I hope the Minister will look at that as the Bill progresses.

[Andrew Percy]

I am very short of time but I also want to raise the issue of search, which the Minister knows I have raised previously. We in the all-party group against antisemitism found examples in Alexa and other voice-activated search platforms where the responses that come back are deeply offensive and racist. I understand that the relationship with the user in entering into a search is different from having an account with a particular social media platform, but these search engines are providing access to all sorts of grotesque racist and misogynistic content and I hope we can look at that as the Bill progresses.

8.49 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Bill. It is an important step forward, and it is because I welcome it that I want to see it strengthened. It seems to be an opportunity for us to get this right and in particular to learn lessons from where we have got it wrong in the past. I want to raise two different types of culture. The first is incel culture, and I would like to relate that to the experience that we had in Keyham, with the massing shooting in Plymouth last year, and the second is the consequences of being Instafamous.

It is just over six months since the tragic shooting in Keyham in which we lost five members of our community. The community feels incredibly strongly that we want to learn the lessons, no matter how painful or difficult they are, to ensure that something like this never happens again. We are making progress, working with the Home Office on gun law changes, in particular on linking medical records and gun certificates. One part is incredibly difficult, and that is addressing incel culture, which has been mentioned from the Front Bench by my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) and by the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy). It sits in the toxic underbelly of our internet and in many cases, it sits on those smaller platforms to which this Bill will not extend the full obligations. I mention that because it results in real-world experiences.

I cannot allocate responsibility for what happened in the Keyham shooting because the inquest is still under way and the police investigations are ongoing, but it is clear that online radicalisation contributed to it, and many of the sites that are referenced as smaller sites that will not be covered by the legislation contributed perhaps in part to the online radicalisation.

When incel culture leads to violence it is not domestic terrorism; it falls between the stools. It must not fall between the stools of this legislation, so I would be grateful if the Minister agreed to meet me and members of the Keyham community to understand how his proposals relate to the learnings that we are coming out with in Keyham to make sure that nothing like this can ever happen again. With the online radicalisation of our young men in particular, it is really important that we understand where the rescue routes are. This is not just about the legislation; it needs to be about how we rescue people from the routes that they are going down. I would like to understand from the Minister how we can ensure that there are rescue routes; that schools, social services and mental health providers can understand how to rescue people from incel culture and the online

radicalisation of incel culture as well as US gun culture—the glorification of guns and the misogynistic culture that exists in this space.

The second point about culture is an important one about how we learn from young people. Plymouth is a brilliant place. It is home to both GOD TV—a global evangelical broadcaster—and to many porn production companies. It is quite an eclectic, creative setting. We need to look at how we can learn from the culture of being Instafamous. Instafamous is something that many of our young people look at from an early age. They look at Body Beautifuls, Perfect Smiles—an existence that is out of reach for many people. In many cases they are viewing the creation of online pornography via sites such as OnlyFans as a natural and logical extension to being Instafamous. It is something that, sadly, can attract a huge amount of income. So young people taking their kit off at an early age, especially in their teenage years, can produce high earnings. I want to see those big companies challenged not to serve links on Instagram profiles to OnlyFans content for under-18s. That sits in a grey area of the Bill. I would be grateful if the Minister looked at how we can have that as a serious setting so that we can challenge that culture and help build understanding about how Instafamous must mean consent and protection.

8.53 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): Overall, I very much welcome the Bill. It has been a long time coming, but none of us here would disagree that we need to protect our children, certainly from pornography and all sorts of harassment and awful things that are on the internet and online communications platforms. There is no argument or pushback there at all. I welcome the age verification side of things. We all welcome that.

The repeal of the Malicious Communications Act 1988 is a good move. The adjustment of a couple of sections of the Communications Act 2003 is also a really good, positive step, and I am glad that the Bill is before us now. I think pretty much everyone here would agree with the principles of the Bill, and I thank the Government for getting there eventually and introducing it. However, as chair of the freedom of speech all-party parliamentary group I need to say a few words and express a few concerns about some of the detail and some of the areas where the Bill could perhaps be improved still further.

The first point relates to the requirement that social media have regard to freedom of speech. It is very easy, with all the concerns we have—I have them too—to push too hard and say that social media companies should clamp down immediately on anything that could be even slightly harmful, even if it is uncertain what “harmful” actually means. We must not give them the powers or the incentive through financial penalties to shut down freedom of speech just in case something is seen to be harmful by somebody. As the Bill progresses, therefore, it would be interesting to look at whether there is an area where we can tighten up rights and powers on freedom of speech.

Secondly, there is the huge issue—one or two other Members have raised it—of definitions. Clearly, if we say that something that is illegal should not be there and should disappear, of course we would all agree with

that. If we say that something that is harmful should not be there, should not be transmitted and should not be amplified, we start to get into difficult territory, because what is harmful for one person may not be harmful for another. So, again, we need to take a little more of a look at what we are talking about there. I am often called “Tory scum” online. I am thick-skinned; I can handle it. It sometimes happens in the Chamber here—[*Laughter.*]/—but I am thick-skinned and I can handle it. So, what if there was an option online for me to say, “You know what? I am relaxed about seeing some content that might be a bit distasteful for others. I am okay seeing it and hearing it.”? In academic discourse in particular, it is really important to hear the other side of the argument, the other side of a discussion, the other side of a debate. Out of context, one phrase or argument might be seen to be really harmful to a certain group within society. I will just flag the trans debate. Even the mention of the word trans or the words male and female can really ignite, hurt and harm. We could even argue that it is severe harm. Therefore, we need to be very careful about the definitions we are working towards.

Finally, the key principle is that we should ensure that adults who have agency can make decisions for themselves. I hope social media companies can choose not to remove content entirely or amplify content, but to flag content so that grown-ups with agency like us, like a lot of the population, can choose to opt in or to opt out.

8.57 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): While long overdue, I welcome the Bill and welcome the fact that it goes some way to addressing some of the concerns previously raised in this House. I thank the Minister for his engagement and the manner in which the Government have listened, particularly on the issue of anonymity. While it is not perfect, we will continue to press for the cloak of anonymity, which allows faceless trolls to abuse and cause harm, to be removed.

In building the Bill, a logical cornerstone would be that what is illegal offline—on the street, in the workplace and in the schoolyard—is also illegal online. The level of abuse I have received at times on social media would certainly be a matter for the police if it happened in person. It is wrong that people can get away with it online. However, there are dangers to our right to free speech around regulating content that is legal but deemed harmful to adults. The Bill allows what is legal but harmful to adults to be decided by the Secretary of State. Whatever is included in that category now could be easily expanded in future by regulations, which we all know means limited parliamentary scrutiny. As responsible legislators, we must reflect on how that power could be misused in the future. It could be a tool for repressive censorship and that is surely something neither the Government nor this House would wish to see in a land where freedom of speech is such a fundamental part of what and who we are. Without robust free speech protections, all the weight of the duties on content that is legal but harmful to adults will be pushing in one direction, and sadly, that is censorship. I urge the Government to address that in the Bill.

We also need to look at the weakness of the Bill in relation to the protection, particularly for children and young people, from pornography. It is welcome that

since the publication of the draft Bill, the Government have listened to concerns by introducing part 5. In eight days, it will be the fifth anniversary of the Digital Economy Act 2017 receiving Royal Assent. This Government took the decision not to implement part 3 of that Act. Those of us in the House who support age verification restrictions being placed on pornographic content are justifiably hesitant, wondering whether the Government will let children down again.

It could be 2025 before children are protected through age verification. Even if the Bill becomes law, there is still no certainty that the Government will commence the provisions. It simply cannot be left to the Secretary of State in 2025 to move secondary legislation to give effect to age verification. A commencement clause needs to be placed in the Bill. Children deserve the right to know that this Government will act for them this time.

Furthermore, the Bill needs to be consistent in how it deals with pornography across parts 3 and 5. Age verification is a simple concept. If a website, part of a website or social media platform hosts or provides pornographic content, a person's age should be verified before access. If a child went into a newsagents to attempt to buy a pornographic magazine, they would be challenged by the shopkeeper. This goes back to the cornerstone of this issue: illegal offline should mean illegal online. The concept may be simple but the Bill, as drafted, adds unnecessary complexities. I ask the Minister to act and make parts 3 and 5 similar. We should also give Ofcom more power when it is implementing the Bill.

9.1 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I had the great privilege of sitting on the Joint Committee on the draft Bill before Christmas and working with the Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), fantastic Members from across both Houses and amazing witnesses.

We heard repeated stories of platforms profiting from pain and prejudice. One story that really affected me was that of Zach Eagling, a heroic young boy who has cerebral palsy and epilepsy and who was targeted with flashing images by cruel trolls to trigger seizures. Those seizures have been triggered for other people with epilepsy, affecting their lives and risking not just harm, but potentially death, depending on their situation. That is why I and my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb)—and all members of the Joint Committee, actually, because this was in our report—backed Zach's law.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Ten-year-old Zach is a child in my constituency who has, as the hon. Member said, cerebral palsy and epilepsy, and he has been subjected to horrendous online abuse. I hope that the Minister can provide clarity tonight and confirm that Zach's law—which shows that not just psychological harm and distress, but physical harm can be created as a result of online abuse and trolling—will be covered in the Bill.

Dean Russell: My understanding—hopefully this will be confirmed from the Dispatch Box—is that Zach's law will be covered by clause 150 in part 10, on communications offences, but I urge the Ministry of Justice to firm that up further.

[*Dean Russell*]

One thing that really came through for me was the role of algorithms. The only analogy that I can find in the real world for the danger of algorithms is narcotics. This is about organisations that focused on and targeted harmful content to people to get them to be more addicted to harm and to harmful content. By doing that, they numbed the senses of people who were using technology and social media, so that they engaged in practices that did them harm, turning them against not only others, but themselves. We heard awful stories about people doing such things as barcoding—about young girls cutting themselves—which was the most vile thing to hear, especially as a parent myself. There was also the idea that it was okay to be abusive to other people and the fact that it became normalised to hurt oneself, including in ways that can be undoable in future.

That leads on to a point about numbing the senses. I am really pleased that in debating the Bill today we have talked about the metaverse, because the metaverse is not just some random technology that we might talk about; it is about numbing the senses. It is about people putting on virtual reality headsets and living in a world that is not reality, even if it is for a matter of minutes or hours. As we look at these technologies and at virtual reality, my concern is that children and young people will be encouraged to spend more time in worlds that are not real and that could include more harmful content. Such worlds are increasingly accurate in their reality, in the impact that they can have and in their capability for user-to-user engagement.

I therefore think that although at the moment the Bill includes Meta and the metaverse, we need to look at it almost as a tech platform in its own right. We will not get everything right at first; I fully support the Bill as it stands, but as we move forward we will need to continue to improve it, test it and adapt it as new technologies come out. That is why I very much support the idea of a continuing Joint Committee specifically on online safety, so that as time goes by the issues can be scrutinised and we can look at whether Ofcom is delivering in its role. Ultimately, we need to use the Bill as a starting point to prevent harm now and for decades to come.

9.5 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I welcome the Bill, which is necessary and overdue, but I would like to raise two issues: how the Bill can tackle suicide and self-harm prevention, and mental health around body image for young people.

First, all suicide and self-harm content should be addressed across all platforms, regardless of size: it is not just the larger platforms that should be considered. The requirement imposed on category 1 platforms relating to legal but harmful suicide and self-harm content should be extended to all platforms, as many colleagues have said. There is a real concern that users will turn from the larger to the smaller platforms, so the issue needs to be addressed. Will the Minister confirm that even smaller platforms will be asked at the start to do an assessment of the risk they pose?

Secondly, the Secretary of State referred to secondary legislation, which will be necessary to identify legal but harmful suicide and self-harm content as a real priority

for action. It would be really helpful if we could see that before the legislation is finally passed: it is a key issue and must be an urgent area of work.

Thirdly, I wonder whether the Government will look again at the Law Commission's proposal that a new offence of encouraging or assisting serious self-harm be created, and that the Bill should make assisting self-harm a priority issue with respect to illegal content. Will the Minister look again at that proposal as the Bill progresses?

I also want to speak about damage to body image, particularly in relation to young people. All of us want to look our best on social media. Young people in particular face a real barrage of digitally enhanced and in many cases unrealistic images that can have a negative effect on body image. Research by the Mental Health Foundation shows that harmful material that damages body image can have a real negative effect on young people's mental health. As other hon. Members have said, and as most of us know from our own experience, many of the images that we see on social media are driven by algorithms that can amplify the harm to young people. That is particularly concerning as an issue associated with the possible development of eating disorders and mental health conditions.

The Bill does include some provision on algorithms, but more needs to be done to protect our young people from that damage. I encourage the Government to consider amendments that would give more control over new algorithmic content and ensure that the safest settings are the default settings. Users should be given more control over the kind of advertising that they see and receive, to avoid excessive advertising showing perfect bodies. The Government should commit themselves to recognising material that damages body image as a serious form of harm.

There are many more detailed issues that I would have liked to raise tonight, but let me end by saying that we need to give serious consideration to ways of reducing the incidence of suicides and self-harm.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am reluctant to reduce the time limit, but I am receiving appeals for me to try to get more people in, so I will reduce it to three minutes. However, not everyone will have a chance to speak this evening.

9.10 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I congratulate the ministerial team and the army of fantastic officials who have brought this enormous and groundbreaking Bill to its current stage. It is one of the most important pieces of legislation that we will be dealing with. No country has attempted to regulate the internet so comprehensively as we have, and I welcome all the improvements that have been made to bring the Bill to this point. Those people have been extremely brave, and they have listened. There are widely competing interests at stake here, and the navigation of the Bill to a position where it has already achieved a degree of consensus is quite remarkable.

The pressure is on now, not least because we have all got into the habit of describing the Bill as the cavalry coming over the hill to solve all the ills of the online

world. It is worth acknowledging from the outset that it will not be the silver bullet or the panacea for all the challenges that we face online. The point is, however, that it needs to be the best possible starting point, the groundworks to face down both the current threats and, more important, the likely challenges of the future. We all have a huge responsibility to work collaboratively, and not to let this process be derailed by side issues or clouded by party politics. Never has the phrase “not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good” been more appropriate. So much will be at risk if we do not seize the opportunity to make progress.

As the Secretary of State pointed out, the irony is that this vast and complex legislation is completely unnecessary. Search engines and social media platforms already have the ability to reduce the risks of the online world if they want to, and we have seen examples of that. However, while the bottom line remains their priority—while these precious algorithms remain so protected—the harms that are caused will never be tackled. With that in mind, I am more convinced than ever of the need for platforms to be held to account and for Ofcom to be given the powers to ensure that they are.

Inevitably, we will need to spend the next few weeks and months debating the various facets of this issue, but today I want to underline the bigger picture. It has always been an overarching theme that protecting children must be a top priority. One of the toughest meetings that I had as Digital Minister was with Ian Russell, whose 14-year-old daughter Molly took her own life after reading material promoting suicide and self-harm on Instagram. That is a conversation that brings a chill to the heart of any parent. Children are so often the victims of online harms. During lockdown, 47% of children said they had seen content that they wished they had not seen. Over a month-long period, the Internet Watch Foundation blocked at least 8.8 million attempts by UK internet users to access videos and images of children suffering sexual abuse.

There is so much at stake here, and we need to work together to ensure that the Bill is the very best that it can possibly be.

9.12 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Obviously I, and my party, support the thrust of the Bill. The Government have been talking about this since 2018, so clearly time is of the essence.

Members have referred repeatedly to the slight vagueness of the definitions currently in the Bill—words such as “harms”, for instance—so I wanted to examine this from a “first principles” point of view. In another place, and almost in another life, and for four long years—perhaps as a punishment brief—I was made the Chairman of Subordinate Legislation Committee in the Scottish Parliament, so without bragging terribly much, I can say that there is nothing I do not know about affirmative and negative resolutions and everything to do with statutory instruments. You could call me a statutory instrument wonk. What I do know, and I do not think it is very different from discussion here, is that instruments come and go; they are not on the face of a Bill, because they are secondary legislation; and, by and large, ordinary, run-of-the-mill Members of Parliament do not take a

huge amount of interest in them. The fact is, however, that the powers that will be granted to the Secretary of State to deliver definitions by means of subordinate legislation—statutory instruments—concern me slightly.

Reference has been made to how unfortunate it would be if the Secretary of State could tell the regulator what the regulator was or was not to do, and to the fact that other countries will look at what we do and, hopefully, see it as an example of how things should be done on a worldwide basis. Rightly or wrongly, we give ourselves the name of the mother of Parliaments. The concept of freedom of speech is incredibly important to the way we do things in this place and as a country. When it comes to the definition of what is bad, what is good, what should be online and what should not, I would feel happier if I could see that all 650 Members of Parliament actually understood and owned those definitions, because that is fundamental to the concept of freedom of speech. I look forward to seeing what comes back, and I have no reason to think that the Government are unsympathetic to the points that I am making. This is about getting the balance right.

Finally, in the short time available, I want to make two last points. My party is very keen on end-to-end encryption, and I need reassurance that that remains a possibility. Secondly, on the rules governing what is right and what is wrong for the press, the seven criteria would, as I read them, still allow a channel that I am not keen on, the Russian propaganda channel Russia Today, to broadcast, and allow my former colleague, the former First Minister of Scotland—this is no reflection on the Scottish National party—to broadcast his nonsense. That has now been banned, but the rules, as I see them, would allow Russia Today to broadcast.

9.15 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): I am a great believer in the good that social media has done over the last few decades. It has transformed the way we interact, share ideas and stay connected. Social media has allowed a global conversation about global challenges such as climate change, poverty and even the conflict that we are witnessing in Ukraine. However, there is a dark side to social media, and I would be surprised if there were any Member of this House who had not experienced some form of it. The online world has become like the wild west: anything goes. Indeed, it was just last year when the whole country was gripped by the success of our football team in the Euros, and as I sadly watched us lose another penalty shoot-out, I turned to my wife and said, “You know what’s going to happen now, don’t you?” And it did. The three players who missed penalties, all young black men, were subjected to disgusting racist abuse. Monkey emojis were used to taunt them, and were not taken down because the Instagram algorithm did not deem that to be racism. Abuse on Twitter was rife, and the scale of it was so large that it restarted a national conversation, which I am sad to say we have had many times before.

On the back of that, I, along with 50 of my colleagues, wrote to the major social media companies: Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and TikTok. We asked for three things: that all accounts be verified; that the algorithm be adjusted with human interaction to account for differences in languages; and that there be a “three strikes and you’re out” policy for serial offenders, so

[Saqib Bhatti]

that they knew that they would not be allowed to get away with abuse. Unfortunately, not all the companies responded, which shows how much respect they have for our democratic processes and for the moral duty to do the right thing. Those that did respond took long enough to do so, and took the view that they were already doing enough. Clearly, anyone can go on social media today and see that that is not true. It is not that the companies are burying their head in the sand; it is just not very profitable for them to make a change. If they had the will to do so, they certainly have the skill, innovative ability and resources to make it happen.

I fully accept that, in this legislation, the Government have taken a different approach, and there are clearly different ways to skin this cat. The 10% of turnover for fines, the clarity on what is allowed in companies' terms and conditions, and effective enforcement may well draw a clear line in the sand. I call on the social media companies to heed the message sent by 50 of my colleagues, and to once again recognise their moral duty to be positive and good players in society. We have an opportunity today to set a standard, so that when an aspiring young boy or girl wants to be in the public eye, whether as an athlete, a media star or a politician, they will no longer think that being abused online is an inevitable consequence of that choice.

9.18 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I speak in this debate as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ticket abuse, which I set up over 10 years ago. The APPG shines a light on ticket abuse and campaigns to protect fans who are purchasing event tickets from being scammed and ripped off, often by the large-scale ticket touts that dominate resale sites such as Viagogo and StubHub. The APPG works with experts in the field such as FanFair Alliance, a music industry campaign, and the Iridium Consultancy to tackle industrial-scale ticket touting. I hope that when this legislation is reviewed in Committee, those organisations will be called on to share their expertise in this area.

Sadly, online ticket fraud is absolutely rife. Despite some regulatory and legislative improvements, not least in the Consumer Rights Act 2015, too many fans are still being scammed on a regular basis. The Bill, as it stands, includes a major loophole that means people will not be properly protected from online fraud. Search engines such as Google are not currently covered by the requirements on fraudulent advertising. A key issue in the ticketing market is how websites that allow fraudulent tickets to be sold often take out paid ads with Google that appear at the top of the search results. This gives the false impression to consumers that these sites are official ticket outlets. People mistakenly believe that only authorised ticket outlets can advertise on Google—people trust Google—and they are scammed as a result.

The Times reported last year that Google was taking advertising money from scam websites selling Premier League football tickets, even though the matches were taking place behind closed doors during lockdown—you couldn't make it up. The Online Safety Bill needs to ensure that consumers are provided with much greater protection and that Google is forced to take greater

responsibility for who it allows to advertise. If the Bill took action, online ticket fraud would be drastically reduced. With £2.3 billion lost to online fraud in the UK last year, it is very much needed.

It is also important to remember the human side of online fraud. Victims go through intense stress, as they are not only scammed out of their money but feel duped, stupid and humiliated. There cannot be a Member of this House who has not had to support a constituent devastated by online fraud. I have come across many stories, including one of an elderly couple who bought two tickets to see their favourite artist to celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary. When they arrived at the venue, they were turned away and told that they had been sold fake tickets. I have a lot more to say, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I think you get the drift.

9.21 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): For too long, the tech giants have been able to dismiss the harms they create for the people we represent because they do not take seriously their responsibility for how their products are designed and used, which is why this legislation is vital.

The Bill will start to change the destructive culture in the tech industry. We live simultaneously in online and offline worlds, and we expect the rules and the culture to be the same in both, but at the moment, they are not. When I visited the big tech companies in Silicon Valley as Secretary of State in 2014 to talk about online moderation, which was almost completely absent at that stage, and child abuse images, which were not regularly removed, I rapidly concluded that the only way to solve the problem and the cultural deficit I encountered would be to regulate. I think this Bill has its roots in those meetings, so I welcome it and the Government's approach.

I am pleased to see that measures on many of the issues on which I have been campaigning in the years since 2014 have come to fruition in this Bill, but there is still room for improvement. I welcome the criminalisation of cyber-flashing, and I pay tribute to *Grazia*, Clare McGlynn and Bumble for all their work with me and many colleagues in this place.

Wera Hobhouse: Scotland banned cyber-flashing in 2010, but that ban includes a motivation test, rather than just a consent test, so a staggering 95% of cyber-flashing goes unpunished. Does the right hon. Lady agree that we should not make the same mistake?

Mrs Miller: I will come on to that shortly, and the hon. Lady knows I agree with her. This is something the Government need to take seriously.

The second thing I support in this Bill is limiting anonymous online abuse. Again, I pay tribute to the Football Association, with which I have worked closely, Glitch, the Centenary Action Group, Compassion in Politics, Hope not Hate and Kick It Out. They have all done a tremendous job, working with many of us in this place, to get to this point.

Finally, I support preventing children from accessing pornography, although I echo what we heard earlier about it being three years too late. It is shameful that this measure was not enacted earlier.

The Minister knows that three demands are coming his way from me. We need to future-proof our approach to the law in this area. Tech moves quickly—quicker than the Government's approach to legislation, which leaves us playing whack-a-mole. The devious methods of causing harm change rapidly, as do the motivations of perpetrators, to answer the point raised by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). What stays the same is the lack of consent from victims, so will the Government please look at that as a way of future-proofing our law? A worrying example of that is deepfake technology that creates pornographic images of women. That is currently totally lawful. Nudification software is commercially available and uses images—only of women—to create nude images. I have already stated publicly that that should be banned. It has been in South Korea and Taiwan, yet our law is playing catch-up.

The second issue that the Government need to address is the fact that they are creating many more victims as a result of this Bill. We need to make sure that victim support is in place to augment the amazing work of organisations such as the Revenge Porn Helpline. Finally, to echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell), let me say that this is a complex area, as we are proving with every speech in this debate. I pay tribute to the Select Committee Chair, who is no longer in his place, and the Joint Committee Chair, but I believe that we need a joint standing committee to scrutinise the implementation of this Bill when it is enacted. This is a world-class piece of legislation to change culture, but we also need other countries to adopt a similar approach. A global approach is needed if this is to work to end the wild west.

9.25 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and a number of contributions this evening chime with my view. My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) outlined our party's broad support for the Bill; however, she and the hon. Members for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) and for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) all raised concerns that can be ironed out and worked upon as the Bill progresses, but that are worthy of reflection, from a principle perspective, at this stage. My hon. Friend rightly said that we should not ban online that which is legal offline. That issue is causing consternation and concern, and it needs to be reflected on and thought through.

There was a chink of light in the exchange between the Minister and the Chair of the Joint Committee, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), who said that we want to, and should, be talking about regulating in the online domain those things that are offences offline. That is what we should be doing, not engaging in discussions about ill-defined or non-defined "legal but harmful" content. We do not know what that is. In this Bill, we are conferring significant power on the Secretary of State, not to decide that, but to bring that proposal forward through a mechanism that does not afford the greatest level of parliamentary scrutiny, as we know. This debate has been curtailed to two and a half hours, and a debate on a statutory instrument on what is legal but harmful will be 90 minutes long, and there will be no ability to amend that instrument.

There has been discussion about journalists. It is right that there should be protections for them, for democratic content and for politicians. However, article 10 of the Human Rights Act does not distinguish between the average Joe and somebody who is providing academic or journalistic content, so should we? Is that the right step? It is right that we provide protection for those individuals, but what about anyone else who wishes to enjoy freedom of expression in the online domain? It has been said that there is a right of appeal, and yes, there is—to an offshored company that marks its own homework and is satisfied with the action it has taken. But it will have removed the journalist or individual's content, and they will have suffered the consequence, with no recourse. They cannot take a judicial review against such a company, and an individual will not be able to go to Ofcom either; it will not be interested unless a super entity or a super-class complaint is involved. There is no recourse here. Those are the sorts of issues we will have to grapple with. There are fines for the companies here, but what about recourse for the individual?

9.29 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): In the one minute you have given me to speak in this debate, let me make three brief points, Madam Deputy Speaker. First, I come to this Bill with concerns about its impact on freedom of speech. I am grateful for the reassurances I have received already, and will be following how we manage journalistic content, in particular, in order to protect that in the Bill.

Secondly, I am concerned about the Bill's impact on the ability of us all to tackle the abuse of the power that social media companies have more broadly. The Bill does not contain measures to increase competition, to enable small businesses in this country to prosper and to ensure that the social media platforms do not crowd out existing businesses. I have been assured that a second Bill will follow this one and will tackle that issue, but in recent days I have heard reports in the press that that Bill will not go forward because of a lack parliamentary time. I would be grateful if the Minister could say when he responds to the debate that that Bill will proceed, because it is an extremely important issue.

9.30 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Everyone wants to be safe online and everyone wants to keep their children safe online but, from grooming to religious radicalisation and from disinformation to cruel attacks on the vulnerable, the online world is far from safe. That is why we all agree that we need better controls while we preserve all that is good about the online world, including free speech.

This Bill is an example of how legislation can benefit from a collegiate, cross-party approach. I know because I have served on the Select Committee and the Joint Committee, both of which produced reports on the Bill. The Bill is ambitious and much of it is good, but there are some holes in the legislation and we must make important improvements before it is passed.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman, with whom I served on the Joint Committee on the draft Bill, agree, having

[Debbie Abrahams]

listened to the evidence of the whistleblower Frances Haugen about how disinformation was used in the US Capitol insurrection, that it is completely inadequate that there is only one clause on the subject in the Bill?

John Nicolson: Yes, and I shall return to that point later in my speech.

The Secretary of State's powers in the Bill need to be addressed. From interested charities to the chief executive of Ofcom, there is consensus that the powers of the Secretary of State in the legislation are too wide. Child safety campaigners, human rights groups, women and girls' charities, sports groups and democracy reform campaigners all agree that the Secretary of State's powers threaten the independence of the regulator. That is why both the Joint Committee and the Select Committee have, unanimously and across party lines, recommended reducing the proposed powers.

We should be clear about what exactly the proposed powers will do. Under clause 40, the Secretary of State will be able to modify the draft codes of practice, thus allowing the UK Government a huge amount of power over the independent communications regulator, Ofcom. The Government have attempted to play down the powers, saying that they would be used only in "exceptional circumstances", but the word "exceptional" is nebulous. How frequent is exceptional? All we are told is that the exceptional circumstances could reflect changing Government "public policy". That is far too vague, so perhaps the Secretary of State will clarify the difference between public policy and Government policy and give us some further definition of "exceptional".

While of course I am sure Members feel certain that the current Secretary of State would exercise her powers in a calm and level-headed way, imagine if somebody intemperate held her post or—heaven forfend—a woke, left-wing snowflake from the Labour Benches did. The Secretary of State should listen to her own MPs and reduce her powers in the Bill.

Let me turn to misinformation and disinformation. The Bill aims not only to reduce abuse online but to reduce harm more generally. That cannot be done without including in the Bill stronger provisions on disinformation. As a gay man, I have been on the receiving end of abuse for my sexuality, and I have seen the devastating effect that misinformation and disinformation have had on my community. Disinformation has always been weaponised to spread hate; however, the pervasive reach of social media makes disinformation even more dangerous.

The latest battle ground for LGBT rights has seen an onslaught against trans people. Lies about them and their demand for enhanced civil rights have swirled uncontrollably. Indeed, a correspondent of mine recently lamented "trans funding" in the north-east of Scotland, misreading and misunderstanding and believing it to involve the compulsory regendering of retiring oil workers in receipt of transitional funding from the Scottish Government. That is absurd, of course, but it says something about the frenzied atmosphere stirred up by online transphobes.

The brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine, with lies spewed by the Russian Government and their media apologists, has, like the covid pandemic, illustrated some

of the other real-world harms arising from disinformation. It is now a weapon of war, with serious national security implications, yet the UK Government still do not seem to be taking it seriously enough. Full Fact, the independent fact-checking service, said that there is currently no credible plan to tackle disinformation. The Government may well argue that disinformation will fall under the false communications provision in clause 151, but in practice it sets what will likely be an unmeetable bar for services. As such, most disinformation will be dealt with as harmful content.

We welcome the Government's inclusion of functionality in the risk assessments, which will look not just at content but how it spreads. Evidence from the two Committees shows that the dissemination of harm is as important as the content itself, but the Government should be more explicit in favouring content-neutral modes for reducing disinformation, as this will have less of an impact on freedom of speech. That was recommended by the Facebook whistleblowers Sophie Zhang and Frances Haugen.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

John Nicolson: No, I will make some progress, if I may.

A vital tool in countering disinformation is education, and Estonia—an early and frequent victim of Russian disinformation—is a remarkable case study. That is why the Government's decision to drop Ofcom's clause 104 media duties is perplexing. Media literacy should be a shared responsibility for schools, Government, and wider society. Spreading and enhancing media literacy should be up to not just Ofcom, but the larger platforms too. Ofcom should also be allowed to break platform terms and conditions for the purposes of investigation. For example, it would currently be unable to create fake profiles to analyse various companies' behaviour, such as their response to abuse. It would empower the regulator.

Various issues arise when trying to legislate for harm that is not currently illegal. This is challenging for us as legislators since we do not know exactly what priority harms will be covered by secondary legislation, but we would like assurances from the Government that Zach's law, as it has come to be known, will become a standalone offence. Vicious cowards who send seizure-inducing flashing images to people with epilepsy to trigger seizures must face criminal consequences. The Minister told me in a previous debate that this wicked behaviour will now be covered by the harmful communications offence under clause 150, but until a specific law is on the statute book, he will, I imagine, understand families' desire for certainty.

Finally, I turn to cross-platform abuse. There has been a terrifying increase in online child abuse over the past three years. Grooming offences have increased by 70% in that period. The Select Committee and the Joint Committee received a host of recommendations which, disappointingly, seem to have been somewhat ignored by the Government. On both Committees, we have been anxious to reduce "digital breadcrumbing", which is where paedophiles post images of children which may look benign and will not, therefore, be picked up by scanners. However, the aim is to induce children, or to encourage other paedophiles, to leave the regulated site

and move to unregulated sites where they can be abused with impunity. I urge the Secretary of State to heed the advice of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Without enacting the measures it recommends, children are at ever greater risk of harm.

The House will have noted that those on the SNP Benches have engaged with the Government throughout this process. Indeed, I am the only Member to have sat on both the Joint Committee and the Select Committee as this Bill has been considered and our reports written. It has been a privilege to hear from an incredible range of witnesses, some of whom have displayed enormous bravery in giving their testimony.

We want to see this legislation succeed. That there is a need for it is recognised across the House—but across the House, including on the Tory Benches, there is also recognition that the legislation can and must be improved. It is our intention to help to improve the legislation without seeking party advantage. I hope the Secretary of State will engage in the same constructive manner.

9.39 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is an honour to close this debate on behalf of the Opposition. Sadly, there is so little time for the debate that there is much that we will not even get to probe, including any mention of the Government's underfunded and ill-thought-through online media strategy.

However, we all know that change and regulation of the online space are much needed, so Labour welcomes this legislation even in its delayed form. The current model, which sees social media platforms and tech giants making decisions about what content is hosted and shared online, is simply failing. It is about time that that model of self-regulation, which gives too much control to Silicon Valley, was challenged.

Therefore, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) said, Labour broadly supports the principles of the Bill and welcomes some aspects of the Government's approach, including the duty of care frameworks and the introduction of an independent regulator, Ofcom. It cannot and should not be a matter for the Government of the time to control what people across the UK are able to access online. Labour will continue to work hard to ensure that Ofcom remains truly independent of political influence.

We must also acknowledge, however, that after significant delays this Bill is no longer world leading. The Government first announced their intention to regulate online spaces all the way back in 2018. Since then, the online space has remained unregulated and, in many cases, has perpetuated dangerous and harmful misinformation with real-world consequences. Colleagues will be aware of the sheer amount of coronavirus vaccine disinformation so easily accessed by millions online at the height of the pandemic. Indeed, in many respects, it was hard to avoid.

More recently, the devastating impact of state disinformation at the hands of Putin's regime has been clearer than ever, almost two years after Parliament's own Intelligence and Security Committee called Russian influence in the UK "the new normal".

Deidre Brock: Does the hon. Lady share my disappointment and concern that the Bill does nothing to address misinformation and disinformation in political advertising? A rash of very aggressive campaign groups

emerged before the last Scottish Parliament elections, for example; they spent heavily on online political advertising, but were not required to reveal their political ties or funding sources. That is surely not right.

Alex Davies-Jones: I share the hon. Lady's concern. There is so much more that is simply missing from this Bill, which is why it is just not good enough. We have heard in this debate about a range of omissions from the Bill and the loopholes that, despite the years of delay, have still not been addressed by the Government. I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House for pointing those out. It is a shame that we are not able to address them individually here, but we will probe those valued contributions further in the Bill Committee.

Despite huge public interest and a lengthy prelegislative scrutiny process, the Government continue to ignore many key recommendations, particularly around defining and regulating both illegal and legal but harmful content online. The very nature of the Bill and its heavy reliance on secondary legislation to truly flesh out the detail leaves much to be desired. We need to see action now if we are truly to keep people safe online.

Most importantly, this Bill is an opportunity, and an important one at that, to decide the kind of online world our children grow up in. I know from many across the House that growing up online as children do now is completely unimaginable. When I was young, we played Snake on a Nokia 3310, and had to wait for the dial-up and for people to get off the phone in order to go online and access MSN, but for people today access to the internet, social media and everything that brings is a fundamental part of their lives.

Once again, however, far too much detail, and the specifics of how this legislation will fundamentally change the user experience, is simply missing from the Bill. When it comes to harmful content that is not illegal, the Government have provided no detail. Despite the Bill's being years in the making, we are no closer to understanding the impact it will have on users.

The Bill in its current draft has a huge focus on the tools for removing and moderating harmful content, rather than ensuring that design features are in place to make services systematically safer for all of us. The Government are thus at real risk of excluding children from being able to participate in the digital world freely and safely. The Bill must not lock children out of services they are entitled to use; instead, it must focus on making those services safe by design.

I will push the Minister on this particular point. We are all eager to hear what exact harms platforms will have to take steps to address and mitigate. Will it be self-harm? Will it perhaps be content promoting eating disorders, racism, homophobia, antisemitism and misogyny? One of the key problems with the Bill is the failure to make sure that the definitions of "legal but harmful" content are laid out within it. Will the Minister therefore commit to amending the Bill to address this and to allow for proper scrutiny? As we have heard, the Government have also completely failed to address what stakeholders term the problem of breadcrumbing. I would be grateful if the Minister outlined what steps the Government will be taking to address this issue, as there is clearly a loophole in the Bill that would allow this harmful practice to continue.

[Alex Davies-Jones]

As we have heard, the gaps in the Bill, sadly, do not end there. Women and girls are disproportionately likely to be affected by online abuse and harassment. Online violence against women and girls is defined as including but not limited to

“intimate image abuse, online harassment, the sending of unsolicited explicit images, coercive ‘sexting’, and the creation and sharing of ‘deepfake’ pornography.”

This Bill is an important step forward but it will need significant strengthening to make online spaces safe for women and girls. While we welcome the steps by the Government to include cyber-flashing in the Bill, it must go further in other areas. Misogyny should be included as a harm to adults that online platforms have a duty to prevent from appearing on them. As colleagues will be aware, Instagram has been completely failing to tackle misogynistic abuse sent via direct message. The Centre for Countering Digital Hate has exposed what it terms an “epidemic of misogynistic abuse”, 90% of which has been completely and utterly ignored by Instagram, even when it has been reported to moderators. The Government must see sense and put violence against women and girls into the Bill, and it must also form a central pillar of regulation around legal but harmful content. Will the Minister therefore commit to at least outlining the definitions of “legal but harmful” content, both for adults and children, in the Bill?

Another major omission from the Bill as currently drafted is its rather arbitrary categorisation of platforms based on size versus harm. As mentioned by many hon. Members, the categorisation system as it currently stands will completely fail to address some of the most extreme harms on the internet. Thanks to the fantastic work of organisations such as Hope not Hate and the Antisemitism Policy Trust, we know that smaller platforms such as 4chan and BitChute have significant numbers of users who are highly motivated to promote extremely dangerous content. The Minister must accept that his Department has been completely tone-deaf on this particular point, and—he must listen to what hon. Members have said today—its decision making utterly inexplicable. Rather than an arbitrary size cut-off, the regulator must instead use risk levels to determine which category a platform should fall into so that harmful and dangerous content does not slip through the net. Exactly when will the Minister’s Department publish more information on the detail around this categorisation system? Exactly what does he have to say to those people, including many Members here today, who have found themselves the victim of abusive content that has originated on these hate-driven smaller platforms? How will this Bill change their experience of being online? I will save him the energy, because we all know the real answer: it will do little to change the situation.

This Bill was once considered a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve internet safety for good, and Labour wants to work with the Government to get this right. Part of our frustration is due to the way in which the Government have failed to factor technological change and advancement—which, as we all know, and as we have heard today, can be extremely rapid—into the workings of this Bill. While the Minister and I disagree on many things, I am sure that we are united in saying that no one can predict the future, and that is not

where my frustrations lie. Instead, I feel that the Bill has failed to address issues that are developing right now—from developments in online gaming to the expansion of the metaverse. These are complicated concepts but they are also a reality that we as legislators must not shy away from.

The Government have repeatedly said that the Bill’s main objective is to protect children online, and of course it goes without saying that Labour supports that. Yet with the Bill being so restricted to user-to-user services, there are simply too many missed opportunities to deal with areas where children, and often adults, are likely to be at risk of harm. Online gaming is a space that is rightly innovative and fast-changing, but the rigid nature of how services have been categorised will soon mean that the Bill is outdated long before it has had a chance to have a positive impact. The same goes for the metaverse.

While of course Labour welcomes the Government’s commitment to prevent under-18s from accessing pornography online, the Minister must be realistic. A regime that seeks to ban rather than prevent is unlikely to ever be able to keep up with the creative, advanced nature of the tech industry. For that reason, I must press the Minister on exactly how this Bill will be sufficiently flexible and future-proofed to avoid a situation whereby it is outdated by the time it finally receives Royal Assent. We must make sure that we get this right, and the Government know that they could and can do more. I therefore look forward to the challenge and to working with colleagues across the House to strengthen this Bill throughout its passage.

9.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): The piece of legislation before the House this evening is truly groundbreaking, because no other jurisdiction anywhere in the world has attempted to legislate as comprehensively as we are beginning to legislate here. For too long, big tech companies have exposed children to risk and harm, as evidenced by the tragic suicide of Molly Russell, who was exposed to appalling content on Instagram, which encouraged her, tragically, to take her own life. For too long, large social media firms have allowed illegal content to go unchecked online.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I have spoken before about dangerous suicide-related content online. The Minister mentions larger platforms. Will the Government go away and bring back two amendments based on points made by the Samaritans? One would bring smaller platforms within the scope of sanctions, and the second would make the protective aspects of the Bill cover people who are over 18, not just those who are under 18. If the Government do that, I am sure that it will be cause for celebration and that Members on both sides of the House will give their support.

Chris Philp: It is very important to emphasise that, regardless of size, all platforms in the scope of the Bill are covered if there are risks to children.

A number of Members, including the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), have raised the issue of small platforms that are

potentially harmful. I will give some thought to how the question of small but high-risk platforms can be covered. However, all platforms, regardless of size, are in scope with regard to content that is illegal and to content that is harmful to children.

For too long, social media firms have also arbitrarily censored content just because they do not like it. With the passage of this Bill, all those things will be no more, because it creates parliamentary sovereignty over how the internet operates, and I am glad that the principles in the Bill command widespread cross-party support.

The pre-legislative scrutiny that we have gone through has been incredibly intensive. I thank and pay tribute to the DCMS Committee and the Joint Committee for their work. We have adopted 66 of the Joint Committee's recommendations. The Bill has been a long time in preparation. We have been thoughtful, and the Government have listened and responded. That is why the Bill is in good condition.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Philp: I must make some progress, because I am almost out of time and there are lots of things to reply to.

I particularly thank previous Ministers, who have done so much fantastic work on the Bill. With us this evening are my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) and my right hon. Friends the Members for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) and for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), but not with us this evening are my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright), who I think is in America, and my right hon. Friends the Members for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) and for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), all of whom showed fantastic leadership in getting the Bill to where it is today. It is a Bill that will stop illegal content circulating online, protect children from harm and make social media firms be consistent in the way they handle legal but harmful content, instead of being arbitrary and inconsistent, as they are at the moment.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) *rose—*

Munira Wilson *rose—*

Chris Philp: I have so many points to reply to that I have to make some progress.

The Bill also enshrines, for the first time, free speech—something that we all feel very strongly about—but it goes beyond that. As well as enshrining free speech in clause 19, it gives special protection, in clauses 15 and 16, for content of journalistic and democratic importance. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State indicated in opening the debate, we intend to table a Government amendment—a point that my right hon. Friends the Members for Maldon and for Ashford (Damian Green) asked me to confirm—to make sure that journalistic content cannot be removed until a proper right of appeal has taken place. I am pleased to confirm that now.

We have made many changes to the Bill. Online fraudulent advertisers are now banned. Senior manager liability will commence immediately. Online porn of all kinds, including commercial porn, is now in scope. The

Law Commission communication offences are in the Bill. The offence of cyber-flashing is in the Bill. The priority offences are on the face of the Bill, in schedule 7. Control over anonymity and user choice, which was proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) in her ten-minute rule Bill, is in the Bill. All those changes have been made because this Government have listened.

Let me turn to some of the points made from the Opposition Front Bench. I am grateful for the in-principle support that the Opposition have given. I have enjoyed working with the shadow Minister and the shadow Secretary of State, and I look forward to continuing to do so during the many weeks in Committee ahead of us, but there were one or two points made in the opening speech that were not quite right. This Bill does deal with systems and processes, not simply with content. There are risk assessment duties. There are safety duties. There are duties to prevent harm. All those speak to systems and processes, not simply content. I am grateful to the Chairman of the Joint Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), for confirming that in his excellent speech.

If anyone in this House wants confirmation of where we are on protecting children, the Children's Commissioner wrote a joint article with the Secretary of State in the *Telegraph*—I think it was this morning—confirming her support for the measures in the Bill.

When it comes to disinformation, I would make three quick points. First, we have a counter-disinformation unit, which is battling Russian disinformation night and day. Secondly, any disinformation that is illegal, that poses harm to children or that comes under the definition of “legal but harmful” in the Bill will be covered. And if that is not enough, the Minister for Security and Borders, who is sitting here next to me, intends to bring forward legislation at the earliest opportunity to cover counter-hostile state threats more generally. This matter will be addressed in the Bill that he will prepare and bring forward.

I have only four minutes left and there are so many points to reply to. If I do not cover them all, I am very happy to speak to Members individually, because so many important points were made. The right hon. Member for Barking asked who was going to pay for all the Ofcom enforcement. The taxpayer will pay for the first two years while we get ready—£88 million over two years—but after that Ofcom will levy fees on these social media firms, so they will pay for regulating their activities. I have already replied to the point she rightly raised about smaller but very harmful platforms.

My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti) has been campaigning tirelessly on the question of combating racism. This Bill will deliver what he is asking for.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) and my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell) asked about Zach's law. Let me take this opportunity to confirm explicitly that clause 150—the harmful communication clause, for where a communication is intended to cause psychological distress—will cover epilepsy trolling. What happened to Zach will be prevented by this Bill. In addition, the Ministry of Justice and the Law Commission are looking at whether we can also have a standalone provision, but let me assure them that clause 150 will protect Zach.

[Chris Philp]

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon asked a number of questions about definitions. Companies can move between category 1 and category 2, and different parts of a large conglomerate can be regulated differently depending on their activities. Let me make one point very clear—the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) also raised this point. When it comes to the provisions on “legal but harmful”, neither the Government nor Parliament are saying that those things have to be taken down. We are not censoring in that sense. We are not compelling social media firms to remove content. All we are saying is that they must do a risk assessment, have transparent terms and conditions, and apply those terms and conditions consistently. We are not compelling, we are not censoring; we are just asking for transparency and accountability, which is sorely missing at the moment. No longer will those in Silicon Valley be able to behave in an arbitrary, censorious way, as they do at the moment—something that Members of this House have suffered from, but from which they will no longer suffer once this Bill passes.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West, who I see is not here, asked a number of questions, one of which was about—[*Interruption.*] He is here; I do apologise. He has moved—I see he has popped up at the back of the Chamber. He asked about codes of practice not being mandatory. That is because the safety duties are mandatory. The codes of practice simply illustrate ways in which those duties can be met. Social media firms can meet them in other ways, but if they fail to meet those duties, Ofcom will enforce. There is no loophole here.

When it comes to the ombudsman, we are creating an internal right of appeal for the first time, so that people can appeal to the social media firms themselves. There will have to be a proper right of appeal, and if there is not, they will be enforced against. We do not think it appropriate for Ofcom to consider every individual complaint, because it will simply be overwhelmed, by probably tens of thousands of complaints, but Ofcom will be able to enforce where there are systemic failures. We feel that is the right approach.

I say to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Borders will meet him about the terrible Keyham shooting.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) raised a question about online fraud in the context of search. That is addressed by clause 35, but we do intend to make drafting improvements to the Bill, and I am happy to work with her on those drafting improvements.

I have been speaking as quickly as I can, which is quite fast, but I think time has got away from me. This Bill is groundbreaking. It will protect our citizens, it will protect our children—[HON. MEMBERS: “Sit down!”]—and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The Minister just made it. I have rarely seen a Minister come so close to talking out his own Bill.

ONLINE SAFETY BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Online Safety Bill:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 30 June 2022.

- (3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

- (4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

- (5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

- (6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

- (7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

ONLINE SAFETY BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Online Safety Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

- (1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

- (2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

ONLINE SAFETY BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Online Safety Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

- (1) the charging of fees under the Act, and

- (2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)),

That at this day's sitting, Standing Order 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Secretary Nadine Dorries relating to Online Safety Bill: Carry-over.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Really, people just ought to have more courtesy than to get up and, when there is still business going on in this House, to behave as if it is not sitting because it is after 10 o'clock. We really have to observe courtesy at all times in here.

ONLINE SAFETY BILL (CARRY-OVER)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 80A(1)(a)),

That if, at the conclusion of this Session of Parliament, proceedings on the Online Safety Bill have not been completed, they shall be resumed in the next Session.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

UK City of Culture: Southampton's Bid

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

10.2 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I am most grateful to Mr Speaker for having granted this debate on Southampton's bid to be city of culture 2025.

Before I make that pitch, I want to dwell for a while on what culture is to all of us, and the reality is that it will be different for different people. It will vary according to place and time, and it will of course vary according to age. What is culture to one person may well not be to another, and the bid for Southampton has made sure to ask people to consult widely, particularly with the region's young people, to find out what culture means to them.

Culture can be many things—art, music, sport, food, history, place, dance, architecture, invention—but above all that, to me and to Southampton, it is community. It is the people who have come here, and created, built, established and enjoyed what it is that we have that brings us together. This bid has really brought us all together—councils of different political hues, MPs representing both Labour and Conservative, and councillors working hand in hand—to make it through to the final four and to promote all we have to offer.

To make the pitch is easy, and it is made easier still by the broadening of the search to find the UK's city of culture to include wider regions. Southampton lacks nothing, but once we have included the wider Solent region, we have absolutely everything.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct to outline how important this bid is to the community not only in Southampton, but in the wider Solent region. In Eastleigh, we are home to Hampshire Cricket with the Ageas Bowl, and there are various heritage sites in the wider Solent region. Does she agree with me that it is really important, particularly given what she mentions about councils of all political persuasions coming forward, that this bid really does have cross-party support? It is supported by a huge array of people around the region, and that is why Southampton and the wider region should be the city of culture in 2025.

Caroline Nokes: Of course, I agree with my hon. Friend; he is absolutely bang-on and I will mention some of the fantastic attributes Eastleigh is bringing to the wider bid. I am heartened by the strength of the partnerships supporting the bid, as my hon. Friend emphasises.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): On that, may I point out that all parts of Hampshire would be interested in partnering with the city of Southampton in its bid to be city of culture? My own constituency of Basingstoke brings the likes of the Anvil theatre, one of the top 10 concert halls in Europe, as well as the Haymarket and the Proteus theatre. There is a wealth of support there for this bid, and that can also help with the legacy which is so important and I know my right hon. Friend puts great store by.

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention the legacy and I was going to move on to that. From Bournemouth and Poole in the west of the region to Portsmouth in the east—and my right hon. Friend has brought in Basingstoke at the north of the region—many areas are seeking to support and partner with the city in making this bid.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab) *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: I am tempted to give way to my neighbour in Southampton, Test, who appears to wish to intervene.

Dr Whitehead: I thank the hon. Member for generously giving way again. I rise both to demonstrate the all-party support for this bid and because I want to ask my right hon. Friend—as the right hon. Lady is for this purpose—whether she considers the proud multicultural heritage of Southampton since the 12th century of welcoming different cultures and communities into the city and learning from them and establishing them in the process to be an integral and central part of the city's bid for city of culture 2025 and why it should win that coveted title.

Caroline Nokes: I thank my constituency neighbour, and on this occasion hon. Friend, for making that important point and wonder whether he has predicted one of the next chunks of my contribution.

As I have said, we are all celebrating this bid. It is being celebrated by neighbouring authorities and by organisations, business and community groups alike, and an impressive list of ambassadors. It is being supported by the schools, colleges and universities across the region, by the National Oceanography Centre, by our collective museums, art galleries and theatres—which my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) referenced—by the stadiums, parks and sports centres and above all by the people.

Instinctively, when we think of Southampton we think of the Solent and the water, but our bid is not just about boat shows and regattas, brilliant though they are; it is also about the ripple effect of our culture, the tide of Solent water that rises not just once, but twice a day, and carries people with it. There is a tendency to think of people using that tide to leave the city. After all we have a park and a theatre named after the Mayflower, Southampton was where the Titanic set sail on her ill-fated maiden voyage, and it is the cruise capital of the UK, but that tide has, as my constituency neighbour the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) said, also historically brought people to the city. As a result, it has a rich and varied culture, with over 150 languages spoken, with places of worship of every religion we can think of, and an annual peace walk that brings all faiths together. It is a city that celebrates and enjoys difference and diversity while also working hard to bring people together, and of course that is what being the city of culture is all about and can accentuate, widening the reach of that strong maritime history, and enabling the wider region to participate in the legacy this bid seeks to bring.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this mission of addressing need and creating opportunity is important for both Southampton and the wider region and the ripple effect she spoke about? My Gosport constituency has some

pockets of real need and deprivation but also a jewel of heritage, particularly naval heritage, which is so important to celebrate. There is so much potential through this bid to benefit the wider area in both levelling up and also celebrating the things we treasure. That is why I agree that this is an important bid for us to win.

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. She is right. We do have a rich maritime history. The trading character of Southampton but also the Royal Navy heritage of Portsmouth and Gosport are key to this.

As I was saying, when it comes to faith, it is not just about the mosques, the gurdwaras, the Christian churches, the Friends meeting house, the synagogue and the Vedic temple; there are also the shrines to the sporting prowess that the region has in abundance. In this bid we celebrate many religions—that of sport, of music, of food. St Mary's is a fabulous church, where the annual Titanic memorial service is held, but it is also where we worship idols like Ted Bates, Lawrie McMenemy and the current bid ambassador James Ward-Prowse. In 2019, another bid ambassador, Southampton's own Craig David, played there—a concert, I hasten to add, not on the pitch. And we do music in the city, from youth orchestras to festivals, at concerts on the common, and in places like the Engine Rooms and the Joiners. And we most certainly do food. The bid chairman is Masterchef winner Shelina Permalloo, who runs her Mauritian street kitchen in Bedford place. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor had his first job at Kuti's famous brasserie, and we have food from literally everywhere. I always say that food brings communities together, and whether it is the big iftar at the Medina mosque or the langar at the gurdwara in Peterborough road, you can point to examples across our city where we come together to celebrate and to eat.

There are other, different types of temple, across the region—those that celebrate sport like the Ageas bowl, which my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) has already referenced, the home of Hampshire cricket, in neighbouring Eastleigh—and my thanks to that borough for supporting the bid. The village of Hambledon, known as the cradle of cricket, is in the Winchester City Council area, which is also backing this bid. Even in the Solent itself we play cricket. Who would have thought that it was a water sport, but the annual Bramble Bank cricket match happens in the Solent, in late August or early September, dependent upon the tides I have already referred to, literally half way between Southampton and Cowes—which brings me on to some of the more interesting partner relationships, because even Portsmouth is backing this bid. Those who understand the region know there is a challenging rivalry between the two cities, but there is wide recognition that what benefits one will also benefit the other, in terms of visitors, volunteering hours, participation and even levelling up.

Levelling up is not something that is geographically limited to the north. There are challenges in the south as well, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) said. Sometimes Southampton has been described as a northern city in the south, but of course we do have our own character. You only have to look at what city of culture has achieved for Liverpool and for Hull, bringing places together, bringing a focus for activities and an ongoing legacy. That is one of the

crucial parts of the city of culture. I would like to pay tribute to the Southampton bid team, who have made legacy their focus, recognising the year of culture would be 2025, but securing ongoing commitments from businesses and organisations which stretch far beyond that. They have looked at the challenges we face, contemplated the difficulties that the pandemic has brought, and recognised that mental health, particularly for men, has been a big issue, and they have developed a programme of events to include everyone, regardless of age, gender, ability, ethnicity and faith. They have celebrated our rivers—the Itchen and the Test, which combine in the Solent. We have a rich maritime history, which you might expect to be an enormous theme.

But this is also a region which has much to celebrate in the sky. The Spitfire was designed and built here, in Woolston, but tested over the hills of King's Somborne, much further north in my constituency, and it protected us during the second world war. The first ever website was developed by Tim Berners-Lee, a professor at Southampton University, and while one may not be able to see and hear the world wide web in the same way one could the Spitfire, it has come to dominate our lives, as the debate immediately prior to this one ably demonstrated. And this is a bid earthed in our land, with the open parks and the adjacent New Forest, and the South Downs national parks. It is also a bid for the future, celebrating technology and the changes that that brings. So I say to the Minister, and to all those assessing this bid, that we know that we have a great deal to offer, so let us make it so.

10.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for securing this debate. She is a great advocate for Southampton—indeed, the whole area—and is rightly enthusiastic about it having been shortlisted recently in an intensely fierce competition; a record number of places applied this year. I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members who contributed this evening.

The UK city of culture is a key part of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's broader offer to level up across the UK. That reflects the fact that culture is a catalyst for investment in places, and drives economic growth and regeneration. Delivered by DCMS in collaboration with the devolved Administrations, the quadrennial competition invites places across the UK to set out their vision for culture-led regeneration. The city of culture is also about highlighting the role that culture plays in the heart of our communities, with the aim of promoting social cohesion, instilling pride and making places even more attractive to visit, live in and work in.

It is worth reflecting briefly on the many benefits that previous winners of the title have enjoyed. More than £150 million of public and private sector investment was invested in the 2013 winner, Derry/Londonderry; and the 2017 winner, Hull, saw 5.3 million people visiting more than 2,800 events. Coventry, despite huge challenges posed by the pandemic, has developed an extraordinary programme of events that have put culture at the heart of social and economic recovery. Some £500 million has been invested in city-wide regeneration since it was confirmed as the UK city of culture. The

city has seen more than £172 million invested in the likes of music concerts, public art displays, the new Telegraph hotel, a new children's play area in the city centre, and improvements to public transport.

Given those benefits, it is no surprise that finalists in the 2025 competition were whittled down from a record 20 initial UK-wide applications. Southampton, along with three other locations—Bradford, Durham and Wrexham—was approved by the Secretary of State to be shortlisted for the 2025 competition. This was based on advice given to the Government by the independent expert advisory panel. The panel, which is chaired by Sir Phil Redmond, will assess the finalists against criteria such as placemaking, levelling up, UK and international collaboration, opening up access to culture, and creating the lasting legacy that my right hon. Friend spoke about. The panel will make its final recommendation following visits to the four shortlisted places and a final presentation next month. The winner will be announced in Coventry in late May.

As my right hon. Friend eloquently set out, Southampton is a young and very diverse maritime city. As she said, it is brimming with culture and has a huge amount to offer local people and visitors. There is a world-class music scene, and it has many festivals, including the literally mouth-watering food festivals she mentioned. There is also a wide choice of theatres, galleries and museums. The city is home to two universities, which welcome students from all over the world. Southampton has world-leading research into cancer, science and maritime engineering, and minds that famously connected the world through the invention of the world wide web, which she mentioned. From ancient waterways and five centuries of shipbuilding to the making of the Spitfire and the south of England's Science Park innovation hub, Southampton is a city of enterprise. Alongside that, the area has seen significant investment in arts and culture. Arts Council England national portfolio organisations in the local authority of Southampton have received nearly £10 million between 2018 and 2022.

Southampton's UK city of culture bid is being delivered by Southampton 2025 Trust, a partnership including Southampton City Council, the University of Southampton, Solent University and GO! Southampton. I would like to take this opportunity to recognise their dedication and give thanks for all their hard work so far. The bid team are using the process as an opportunity to further enhance perceptions of Southampton and showcase the city to the rest of the UK and the world. They are aiming to celebrate diversity, attract more visitors to the city, encourage enterprise to support home-grown businesses and cultural organisations, and boost opportunities for their young people.

For the first time, the eight longlisted places from across the UK received a £40,000 grant to support their application ahead of the shortlisting stage. The intention was to ensure a fairer competition and aid places in developing deliverable plans. However, this is not just about who wins the competition; there are clear benefits to all places that take part. The consultation process that forms part of the bidding engages local communities and organisations, and that can result in enduring partnerships. Scalable plans can also be developed, and can then still be carried out to some extent if the city does not win.

[Nigel Huddleston]

For example, Hull was unsuccessful in winning the 2013 title, but came back to win the 2017 title. Sunderland, which bid for the 2021 title, created the momentum to form a new arts trust, Sunderland Culture; achieved enhanced Arts Council England funding; and mobilised a lasting team of community volunteers. Paisley, which also bid for the 2021 title, has since raised funds for its museum and hosted a range of major events, including UNBOXED's About Us, which launched last month. Norwich, which bid for the 2013 title, went on to be the UNESCO city of literature.

However, I do not want to be pessimistic. Obviously, there are huge benefits for those that do not win, but there are also huge benefits for those that do. DCMS

wants all bidders to take advantage of the bidding process, and we are committed to working with those who do not win to continue to develop partnerships, advance culture-led change and strengthen cultural strategies, and signpost upcoming opportunities and funding.

I commend Southampton's commitment to winning the UK city of culture competition 2025. There is clearly a very strong case, which has been laid out by hon. Members from across the House this evening. Of course, I wish all shortlisted bidders good luck in the final stages of the competition.

Question put and agreed to.

10.22 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 19 April 2022

[SIR MARK HENDRICK *in the Chair*]

Computer Misuse Act 1990

11.30 am

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Computer Misuse Act 1990.

Before I begin, I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and in particular to my stakeholding in a firm that has offered digital forensic services in the past, but which I understand does not plan to offer such services at least for the next three to five years.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Mark. I am grateful to have secured this important debate of national security significance, especially considering this morning's headlines about the potential spyware attack on No. 10. The need for this debate has become more urgent of late, especially considering the barbaric and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, which has placed a spotlight on the pressing requirement to strengthen the UK's cyber-security.

The UK Government have achieved a great deal in developing our cyber-capabilities, spearheading the creation of the National Cyber Force and putting aside a total of £2.6 billion for cyber and IT, which is a significant funding increase on previous years. I strongly welcome the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport working more closely with cyber-security firms, through £850,000 of funding to support the establishment and activities of the UK Cyber Cluster Collaboration.

Given this Government's strong record developing our cyber-capabilities, it is surprising that 32 years after its introduction as a private Member's Bill, the Computer Misuse Act 1990 remains the primary piece of legislation covering cyber-crime in the UK. I am sure we all agree that the technological landscape has altered drastically over the last 30 years. Our existing legislation must urgently be updated to reflect those monumental changes. When the 1990 Act came into law, Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, the first website was yet to be published and I was just a toddler.

The CMA was brought into law to criminalise unauthorised access to computers. In other words, hacking without permission became illegal, irrespective of motive or intent. However, the CMA came into force before the modern cyber-security industry, which now employs more than 52,000 people across 1,800 firms. In 2022, the methods used by cyber criminals and cyber-security professionals are often very similar—sometimes the same. Individuals who work in cyber-security are frequently required to perform actions for which explicit authorisation is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain.

Contemporary defensive cyber research into computer system vulnerabilities and threat intelligence often involves the scanning and examination of compromised victims and criminal systems to lessen the impact of future attacks—pre-empting what such a hack might resemble to prevent its success. It strikes me as woefully naive to

think that criminals will explicitly authorise access to their systems. To do so would be akin to a policeman asking permission to arrest an individual.

British cyber-security professionals are at risk of being taken to court for obtaining actionable intelligence, which means that as a country we are dissuading vital research from being conducted at a time when countries such as Russia and China are increasingly deploying hostile technologies against us and our allies. Consequently, even though the CMA has been amended several times since 1990, its major flaw is that it fails to allay fear of arrest and/or prosecution among cyber-security professionals as they carry out essential threat intelligence research against cyber criminals and agents of rogue states.

We find ourselves in a perverse situation where industry specialists who are acting in the public interest—often dealing with issues that are critical to our national security infrastructure—are at risk of being designated a criminal. Even with responsible policing, the CMA can still be used by non-state bodies to pursue individuals through the civil courts, causing considerable financial and emotional injury to well-intentioned professionals. If situations such as these remain possible, future generations of cyber professionals could be deterred from pursuing a highly rewarding career, precisely at a time when we should aspire for Britain to continue its reputation as a global cyber leader.

In urging for reform of the CMA, I have worked closely with the CyberUp campaign, which argues for updating the law and makes the case that failure to reform is holding back our cyber defences and preventing the upskilling of our workforce. In the "Time for reform?" report published by the CyberUp campaign and techUK in November 2020, analysis of a survey showed that the industry overwhelmingly suggested that the CMA was not fit for purpose. More than nine in 10 respondents said that they

"did not believe that the Computer Misuse Act represented a world leading example of 21st century cyber crime legislation."

With Russia frequently targeting infrastructure through cyber-attacks, it is becoming increasingly urgent that we resolve the contradictions in the CMA. We need only look at the 2017 Russian state-sponsored NotPetya virus, which caused billions of pounds-worth of damage, to appreciate how devastating such attacks can be. At the epicentre of this digital hydrogen bomb in Ukraine, national transport infrastructure ground to a halt, people were unable to withdraw money from ATMs and even the radiation monitoring system at Chernobyl went offline. The current situation is an immense security risk.

The national cyber strategy, which was published in December 2021, sets out a commitment to improving our resilience to cyber-threats, but currently the strategy is clearly hamstrung because of the CMA. I have spoken to threat intelligence researchers from leading UK cyber-security companies, who have stated that they come up against CMA-related barriers three times a week on average. In those situations, researchers must seek guidance on whether they can investigate without breaching the provisions of the Act. In 80% of such cases, investigations cannot be undertaken. Where investigations can go forward, there is a significant benefit, with the average number of victims who can be identified, and thus warned and supported, varying between a handful and often up to hundreds per investigation.

[Dr Jamie Wallis]

We can extrapolate the figures to try to develop a national picture of what is going on. Using data obtained in the DCMS sectoral analysis 2022, the list of CREST threat intelligence providers and statistics from the DCMS cyber breaches survey 2021, we can surmise that the CMA is an active consideration in relation to at least a hundred, but potentially up to 3,000 investigations, each week across the UK in cyber-threat intelligence firms; that is, of course, assuming that all the other firms are similarly conscientious about staying on the right side of the law. That means that up to 2,400 investigations could be abandoned due to sensitivities around the CMA, which in turn could mean that up to 1 million victims remain unidentified and thus under threat from cyber criminals. Financially, it is estimated that the outdated CMA is costing our economy at least £30 million a week.

Our digital economy is being held back by a law that came into existence when less than half a percent of the population used the internet. We need to make the case that Britain, with its impressive track record in computing, networking and cyber, is a fantastic place to invest, create jobs and upskill our workforce. As it stands, we risk losing out to global competitors with more liberal legislative regulations, such as France, Israel and the United States.

What practical changes need to be made to the CMA for it to be well placed to rise to the challenges of 2022 and beyond? Industry representatives have directly conveyed to me a strong desire to see the inclusion of a statutory defence for cyber-security professionals who are acting in the public interest. Although I understand the need to ensure an effective balance between protecting legitimate cyber-activity and being able to prosecute genuine criminals effectively, one thing that struck me in my meetings with industry representatives was that even among those who felt relatively at ease about the prospect of prosecution, there remained a strong and genuine fear of arrest, which would involve the seizure of their work devices—the tools of their trade—and cause significant stress to individuals who are proud of their contributions to keeping Britain safe.

Currently, the only protections in the Act, beyond a few cases where a warrant is obtained, are extendable only to actions undertaken with explicit authorisation. Consequently, for the law to work for 21st-century Britain and its need to defend itself from cyber-attacks, reform should include a legal mechanism and clarify legal ambiguities in order to put professionals at ease.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I apologise for not being here at the very beginning. My hon. Friend is absolutely correct about a statutory defence, but I understand that that could be achieved without changing the current legislation, particularly if it were done in co-ordination with the Crown Prosecution Service.

Dr Wallis: It is important that we respond directly to the concerns of the cyber-security professionals; this is what they have asked for. Meaningful engagement with them will lead to a potential compromise. There is also a need to balance how we act against genuine cyber criminals, and I think that meaningful engagement and working with them will be the way to find that suitable compromise.

Updating the CMA has widespread cross-party support, with the all-party parliamentary internet group first calling for reform of the CMA in 2004—18 years ago. Since then, the Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia report has recommended that the CMA should be updated in response to the heightened risk of malignant Russian cyber-activities.

Although cyber professionals across the country and I greatly appreciate the announcement by the Home Secretary last year of a review looking at the CMA, progress has seemingly been slow. Some 66% of respondents to the Government's call for information had concerns over the existing legal protections of the CMA, so I hope that the Minister will update us as to whether the review is being expedited, especially considering that there has been an increase in hostile cyber-actions undertaken by rogue states and given this morning's headlines on potential spyware attacks on No. 10. I would also be grateful if the Minister would meet myself and others from the campaign to discuss the matter further. I look forward to hearing contributions from hon. and right hon. Members.

11.41 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Sir Mark. I commend the hon. Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis) for setting the scene so well. I look forward to contributions from others, especially the Minister. From previous experience of dealing with the Minister, and of partnership and co-operation with him, I believe that his answers will be helpful to us. Whether we are technically-minded or otherwise, we all recognise the key issues to which the hon. Member for Bridgend has referred. Why is this issue so important? It is because, as the hon. Gentleman has said, stakeholders have expressed deep and real concerns about the poor security of many devices. I will speak first about individuals and companies, and then probably take my arguments a wee bit beyond that.

Insecure devices can compromise privacy or be hijacked and used to disrupt other uses of the internet. That happens every day in my constituency and across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Government set in motion a strategy, which was first mooted in 2016, that set a date of 2021 for most online products and services to be cyber-secure by default. Will the Minister in his response tell us whether those targets have been met, and if they have not, when will that happen? DCMS has proposed a voluntary code of practice. I certainly would have liked to have had something mandatory in the system. Perhaps the Minister will indicate whether that is his and the Government's intention.

I cannot profess to be technically-minded, but my staff are. They tell me that it is possible to access personal and confidential data, including on bank accounts, through our phones. That is why the debate is vital and why we need to seek from the Minister the reassurance that the protections that people need and want are in place. There is not a week in my constituency when people do not come to me about such issues. If someone phones an individual and talks about that individual's bank account, it is not their bank. If someone phones and asks personal questions about confidential data, they are not legitimate.

In the recess, I watched a consumer programme which highlighted a scam that looked so convincing—what was happening looked absolutely correct to the untrained eye—but the experts looked into the issue and were able to help the person who was being scammed to thwart the scammer. As I have said, there is not a week when I do not hear about a scam. Usually, they are against elderly people, but also against others who inadvertently give out details and lose their savings. Just a few months ago, a gentleman in my constituency was scammed. The appearance of legitimacy and truthfulness meant that he did not fear that it was a scam, but he lost £20,000, which has never been retrieved.

Cyber-attacks are one of the most common types of crime experienced by individuals in the UK. According to national crime statistics, some 2.4% of adults in 2017 and a higher percentage today will have experienced cyber-attacks, including on their personal computers, which is what this debate is about; I thank the hon. Member for Bridgend for setting the scene.

User behaviour is a factor in the poor cyber-security of consumer devices, whether by the individual or the system that they use. The 1990 Act needs to be reviewed to provide greater protection. Some user behaviours include using default, weak or reused passwords. What can we do? We need to establish good practice in the industry, improve the cyber-security of consumer products, adopt a vulnerability disclosure policy, make software updates available for stated lengths of time, and inform consumers on setting up, managing and improving the security of household connected devices, as in the DCMS's own code of practice, which was published some time ago.

UK infrastructure must be protected. The Government have identified cyber as one of the top six tier 1 threats. Cyber-crime costs the UK some £1.27 billion per year, with about 60 high-level cyber-attacks a month, which indicates the magnitude of the problem. Many of the 60 high-level cyber-attacks a month threaten national security, which is also why this debate is important.

The hon. Member for Bridgend referred to Ukraine. Russia launched a cyber-attack on Ukraine's electricity network back in 2015. Some quarter of a million people were impacted by that attack, which I think he also referred to. That example shows that even six or seven years ago, before the war, cyber was being used as an instrument of war by Russia, and indicates how much cyber-attacks can disrupt and compromise. Cyber-attacks are a method of warfare, which is why I support the hon. Gentleman's call for legislative change.

I will make a plug, as I always try to do in these Westminster Hall debates. The Minister will be well aware that Belfast is a cyber-security stronghold and is very much at the forefront of cyber-security development. Belfast has become a capital of security. Any new cyber legislation must not prevent cyber-security experts from doing what they do best, which is finding the loopholes in programs.

Much consultation must take place to ensure that the Government do not tie the experts' hands or throw the baby out with the bathwater. After all, the experts are combating criminal activity, and abuse and aggression from foreign powers such as Russia and China. Will the Minister confirm that any legislation that is proposed will entail working with companies—for example, cyber-security companies in Belfast and Northern Ireland—to enable their excellent progress to continue?

I fully support the motion tabled by the hon. Member for Bridgend. I look forward to hearing the contributions from the two Opposition spokespersons, and particularly to the Minister's response. I hope that he can give us the reassurances we seek, so that we can continue to be at the forefront of cyber-security in Belfast, as we are throughout the whole of the United Kingdom.

11.49 am

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis) on securing this debate. I myself put in for a debate on this issue a while ago, but the gods obviously smile more on Bridgend than they do on Boston. Nevertheless, I welcome this opportunity to debate the issue.

I thank the Minister and his officials for several meetings that he and I have had about this issue relatively recently. All were prompted, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend said, by CyberUp and by Kat Sommer, who deserves to be cited in *Hansard* for her persistence, among many other things.

This is an important but technical issue. I will be honest and say that I am not completely certain that the Computer Misuse Act 1990 is broken, but I am certain that it can be improved, by one means or another. That is because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend said, the structure of the cyber-security industry has changed since the Act came into force, and is different from almost any other part of the national security set-up. If we were to ask whether academics have a right to interrogate systems for the purposes of research, we would definitely say yes. If we were to ask whether businesses have the right to interrogate those same systems, we would assume that it was for commercial purposes and that it was important to have different rules.

It is also a sector where a lot of very small-scale research is done by individuals—some of them literally in their bedrooms. There is a very diverse set of people looking for loopholes and vulnerabilities. Uncovering those vulnerabilities—be they in banks, businesses or any other area where we all rely on the internet—is categorically in the public interest, even if it may also be in the interests of businesses, researchers or people looking for bounties given by large businesses to uncover those vulnerabilities. Those businesses realise that it is in their interests to provide the maximum security to their customers or users.

That gets to the heart of why the Computer Misuse Act matters. On the one hand, it seeks to prevent hacking and other things that we do not want to see done by people with malign intent; but on the other hand, it risks fettering the ability of people with the public interest at heart to solve issues that we would all like to see solved. Admiring the problem is the easy bit; the hard bit is trying to work out what we should do about it.

There are a couple of things that we should not do. We should not introduce a blanket public interest defence for anyone who goes looking for things that might subsequently be perceived as a loophole or bug in a system. To do that would potentially give carte blanche to anyone who got caught, allowing them to claim that they were going to fess up about it, rather than benefit from it themselves. A public interest defence that goes

[*Matt Warman*]

too far should be avoided. I find it hard to imagine how a public interest defence might be constructed that does not, inadvertently or otherwise, go too far.

The other thing that we should not do—notwithstanding the figures that my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend quoted—is assume that cyber firms of any sort should not be mindful of legislation such as the Computer Misuse Act. Of course, if someone is doing research they should consider what is legal. It is a good thing, not a bad thing, that it is a factor for consideration for those who are engaged in the cyber-security industry. We should be mindful of how we can fix the Act, rather than just sweep it away altogether. I come to a point that was made a moment ago; those issues can probably be addressed through enhanced guidance that provides a degree of legal comfort to the unsurprisingly risk-averse lawyers who work for cyber firms and others. Such guidance would not provide *carte blanche* to people who might have malevolent intent.

Criminals will not be looking at the CMA and wondering whether what they are doing is legal; by definition criminals are not bothered about whether they are breaking the law. However, there is an important grey area, and we should not create an unintended opportunity for people to defend themselves in court. I implore the Minister to continue his work on the review of the Act, which is really important, but with some minor legislative tweaking we could provide the comfort that the industry rightly asks for and could continue to secure the excellent reputation that Britain has and, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, that Belfast has, for being a world-leading cyber power. We can build on that success because the CMA is an example of a bit of legislation that, although very old, has largely stood the test of time for a lot longer than many might think.

I will close by simply saying that the principles embedded in the CMA are not bad ones. Whenever it comes to legislating for the internet, we should realise that the internet has not necessarily reinvented every single wheel, and principles that apply offline can be applied online. In this case, they need a little bit of updating, but I do not think we should throw the baby out with the bathwater, as the hon. Member for Strangford said.

11.56 am

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am absolutely delighted to speak in this extremely important debate—it is perhaps not pressingly urgent, but very important. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis) on securing this debate and on his speech. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards), who wrote an excellent foreword in the report from CyberUp and techUK, “Time for Reform? Understanding the UK cyber security industry’s views of the Computer Misuse Act”. It is an excellent paper with sensible suggestions.

If I may say so, we are blessed to have this Security Minister here in his place. As far as I understand it, being Security Minister is not for someone who showboats or campaigns; it is for somebody who is extremely thoughtful and reliable and can really get to the heart of matters, so I am grateful that my right hon. Friend is the Minister replying today. He might not be able to respond to all the points today, but I know he will certainly think

about them. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), who showed his command of the subject.

I approach this debate with great humility, deeply aware of my own inadequacy at rising to the most difficult technical problems involved. I say that not because I do not know anything about the subject, but because I do. I have an MSc in computer science from Oxford, which I gained in 2000. I was once upon a time—at least, I think so—a reasonably competent Unix system administrator. I have done a network intrusion course as a software engineer, and I like to think that I might be considered as once being above average as a software engineer.

Having read books such as “The Art of Computer Programming” and Bruce Schneier’s book on cryptography—he is one of the world’s great experts—I am well aware that the subject of cyber-security is fabulously complex and difficult and not well understood. Without naming the organisation, I once went to a major public body to talk about cyber-security. It had put a large TV up on the wall and on it was a NORAD-style display of cyber-attacks going to and fro across the world, and there was a little software engineer’s rolling league table of which attacks were in progress. I asked what it all meant, and the public body did not know. It could not tell me what the attacks going to and fro meant, which put the meeting in context. So my first point is that no one following this debate or this subject should be under any illusion whatever about the complexity involved. It is a problem for the top 1% of software engineers—the sort of people who might be employed at GCHQ at the very cutting edge of understanding computers, how they work and how things can be dealt with.

Secondly, I think reform of the Computer Misuse Act would be a very good thing. My goodness!—what we have learned and how things have changed since that Act was put in place. Even since I joined Parliament in 2010, software engineering has changed tremendously. We all find that we go out of date very quickly, and the law has to keep pace with how things have changed.

The point was made earlier that some things that happen in the real world have parallels online. When I look at the range of things that software engineers have to do to counter network intrusion and cyber-attacks, at the moment we seem to be in a position akin to saying to a householder, “You may not defend against burglars,” or to someone attacked in the street, “You may not commit acts of self-defence.” That parallel might be flawed, but we have to look extremely carefully at whether software engineers and other professionals are adequately defended in law, so that they can do what is necessary to defend against criminal attack. That is what we are talking about.

The paper from CyberUp and techUK is excellent. I read it only over the weekend, but it all seems to be very sensible and well thought through, and I certainly commend it to the Minister and his officials. They should have a really good look at it to see whether the case has been made, in particular for a statutory defence for professionals in the field, making sure that we have taken into account everything we now know about cyber-security.

I am not actually in favour of an official register of professionals, which is recommended in the paper. There are two reasons for that. First, insert here all the arguments

about the state running registers of professionals—the anti-competitive practice it can encourage and so on—which do not need rehearsing. It would also become something of a honeypot for criminals. If we were to create a privileged list of registered actors who are, in some sense, allowed or better facilitated to conduct cyber-security operations, for want of a better term, that would create an enormous incentive for criminals to get their people on that list, or to corrupt individuals on the list in order to get what they want from them. I remain opposed to having a state-sponsored list of professionals with some kind of privilege to conduct these operations, outside of employees of the state themselves—obviously, we employ people to do this sort of thing. I think that would be a mistake.

Those are the three points that I wanted to make. First, we need humility as we approach these things. This issue is not susceptible to loose pub chat; it needs real expertise. Secondly, reform of the CMA seems to me to be a jolly good idea. Thirdly, there should be no official register. Once again, thank you very much, Sir Mark. I am really looking forward to hearing the response of my right hon. Friend the Minister.

12.1 pm

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis) for securing this debate. Once upon a time I also applied for it, so I am glad that one of us got through the lottery.

I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cyber security, and this is an issue that we have looked at time and again. We have looked at specific reform of the CMA, and frankly, with almost any issue we concentrate on, we keep coming back to the challenges that the CMA brings up for professionals. As others have done, I thank CyberUp for the support it has given, both to the APPG and in advance of this debate. When reforms are made to the CMA, it will be due in no small part to the advocacy that CyberUp and industry have put behind this.

My view is that the CMA is holding the UK back and making us less secure. It needs reform, and the urgency is very keenly felt in the industry. It is frankly ridiculous that we are reliant on a piece of legislation that came into force at the time of Windows 3.0, before Google and Amazon, and crucially before the internet had come into common use.

In the last meeting of the APPG on cyber security we had Ciaran Martin, the former head of the National Cyber Security Centre, before us, and we asked his view. It is hard to articulate how much he rolled his eyes when I asked the question, but clearly the view of those who operate in this space is that the time for change is now.

As it is currently written—I apologise, Sir Mark, for going over some of the same ground—the CMA inadvertently criminalises a large proportion of vulnerability and threat intelligence research that UK cyber-security professionals must carry out to protect the UK from cyber-threats such as the one affecting No. 10 that is in the news today, ransomware attacks and those from state actors such as Russia.

Let us be clear: the legal jeopardy that cyber-security professionals face is not theoretical but very real. We have heard from professionals who have been at the sharp end of the law for merely doing their jobs—probing

weaknesses in order to fix them. At a time when the world has never been more connected, and there is inter-reliance between news, messaging, shopping, banking, security and leisure—the web of systems that hold modern society together—we need to ensure that the laws are fit for purpose and fulfil the roles they were enacted to achieve. I firmly believe that this one does not and we are the poorer for it.

It is worth spending a little time putting this in context and detailing the main challenges of an unreformed CMA. Cyber-security professionals identify vulnerabilities in products and services and work with manufacturers and vendors to fix them. They detect cyber-attacks, gain insights into attackers and victims, lessen the impact of incidents and prevent future ones. The Government's national cyber strategy 2022 recognised the value of that important work. It committed to building valuable and trusted relationships with the cyber-security researcher community to deliver a reduction in those vulnerabilities. But the CMA is currently a block to that, irrespective of the intent or motive of those doing the work. That leaves the UK's cyber defenders having to act with one hand tied behind their back, because much of their defensive work requires interaction with compromised victims' and criminals' computer systems where owners will not give access or explicitly permit such activities.

Another aspect is that the Act is having a really damaging impact on the cyber skills pipeline. In 2018, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy concluded that a shortage of “deep technical expertise” was one of the greatest challenges faced by the UK in relation to cyber-security. This year's national cyber-security strategy made explicit the need to grow and improve sectoral skills in order to build UK resilience to threats. But we should be clear about the chilling effect that the CMA is having on doing that and the challenges that it throws up. The sector needs a diverse range of minds in order to continue to grow and to adapt to a changing environment. High-profile prosecutions enabled by the CMA for little more than pursuing public interest investigations reinforce negative stereotypes that may deter some from pursuing a career in cyber-security. If the UK is to meet the challenge of closing the cyber skills gap, it needs to stop criminalising the activity, and ultimately talent, that is needed to promote the industry and grow its share of the global cyber-security services market, which is currently dominated by North America. That will not only grow cyber skills in our own economy, but help to build cyber resilience and better defend the UK.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend pointed out, there are relatively simple tweaks that we think could be made to this legislation that would make a big difference in this space. They would unlock huge opportunities for the sector and our national resilience. As has been mentioned, the inclusion in the CMA of a statutory defence, not a blanket one—I think my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) was absolutely right on that—would give cyber-security professionals acting in the public interest a clear defence from prosecution. That would provide legal clarity for individuals, the industry and the state. We can learn much from our international partners in this space about how to achieve a fair balance and enact safeguards to ensure that new freedoms are not abused by those who are not on the side of the angels. I am

[Simon Fell]

talking about a clear framework that measures the defensibility of an action, proportionality, intent and competence and looks at a harm-benefit profile. They are the sorts of principles that we should be considering when looking at reform.

It seems bizarre that as we launch the National Cyber Force in Lancashire and as my local town deal brings a university campus focused on cyber-security in Barrow, the legal framework that will enable these people to do their jobs and practise their craft is lagging behind. It is clear from the national cyber-security strategy that, as a country and a Government, we do not lack aspiration in this space, and that is a really good thing. It is the burden of advanced nations to have to defend these new frontiers, but we must ensure that the framework is in place to support our good efforts and deliver on the opportunities that the strategy speaks about. A very good step would be reforming this Act and ensuring that those acting in the public interest have protection from unjust litigation. Doing that would make us all safer.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): While we are on the subject of the new cyber-security centre, I too am very pleased that it is coming to Lancashire; it is next door to my constituency. Like Mr Baker, I am proud to have studied computer science at master's level—in my case at the University of Manchester—so I am very pleased with the developments and the way that things are going forward. We will hear from the Front Benchers now.

12.9 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Mark. We do not always have such a knowledgeable Chair in relation to such technical matters.

Mr Steve Baker: He will answer questions later!

Stuart C. McDonald: Indeed.

I thank the hon. Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis) for securing the debate and for his expert introduction of the topic. He rightly highlighted events in Ukraine, and, indeed, today's reports of attacks on No. 10 as providing a stark backdrop to this discussion. He and all hon. Members made a strong case for revisiting and revising the 1990 Act.

The point I agree with most fundamentally was made by the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who highlighted the complexity of these issues. I feel rather underqualified at the moment, particularly given the CVs on display today. Nevertheless, I approach this topic with an open mind and am open to persuasion by the experts. I welcome the Home Office's call for information last year. The recent cyber strategy hints at this legislation being looked at again. If the Government proceed with reforms, the Minister will have our support and we will play as constructive a part as we can to ensure that they are the right ones.

As we heard, the 1990 Act was pretty much rushed into effect via a private Member's Bill when it seemed to be established that hacking—shoulder surfing in one particular case—was not against the law. Obviously, that had to change, so the legislation put criminal offences on the statute book for unauthorised access,

unauthorised access with intent to commit other crimes and unauthorised modification of computer material, but things have changed significantly since then. The hon. Member for Bridgend said he was a toddler back when the legislation was passed. I certainly was not; I would have been sitting, as a teenager, with my BBC Micro computer taking 20 minutes to load "Football Manager". He is right to point out that, back then, a tiny percentage of the population had access to computers. The internet was something for the future. Technology has changed in unbelievable ways, with computer use now absolutely ubiquitous. People are also using a large number of smart internet-connected devices. That all radically alters the threat landscape from when the legislation came into force.

As the Act explicitly mentions computers and not other internet of things devices that can connect to the internet and be hacked, things such as smart fridges or nanny cams must be argued to be computers to fall under scope of the legislation. We had reference to the submission by the NCA to the House of Commons Russia inquiry, highlighting the widespread use of mobile phones as a reason for urgently updating and reforming the CMA. The legislation does not appear to be effective: one report I read recently suggested that less than 1% of reports of hacking led to prosecutions. There are issues about whether it even works in bringing criminals into the court system for justice.

It is right to acknowledge that it is not the case that the Act has not been updated at all. Changes have been made: punishments have increased and, significantly, the offences of impairing the use of a computer and provision of articles to facilitate misuse have been added. The Government have also started to address the problem of securing smart devices through the Product Security and Telecoms Infrastructure Bill 2022, but revisiting and broadening the scope of the CMA would improve on that and complete the move to address the internet of things security dilemma.

Perhaps a more pressing issue, which Members have rightly focused on, is that the Act does not attempt to differentiate between the motives of hackers: malign cyber criminals who intend to exploit or harm other users or their systems are treated the same as those identifying weaknesses and flagging them up for altruistic reasons. Often, ethical hackers test a company's systems accurately by using the tools that hackers themselves would use. Those concerns have led to the CyberUp campaign and the idea of a statute of defence to protect cyber researchers identifying vulnerabilities in computer systems and company networks not to exploit them but to help fix them. I pay tribute to that campaign for helping me try to understand what this is about.

As the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) put it, all this is holding us back. While US IT security companies can offer whole-of-supply-chain vulnerability scanning to identify weaknesses that could compromise systems, UK companies cannot offer those services for fear of prosecution under the CMA. He pointed out that that has a knock-on effect on our ability to grow our expertise and talent base. If those working legitimately to uncover vulnerabilities or using hacking tools to simulate attacks are left at risk of prosecution for doing their jobs, that leaves companies, organisations and our key infrastructure more vulnerable to attack.

Adding a defence to the Act seems a sensible way to proceed. I accept that the scope of any such defence has to be judged carefully. This is not straightforward. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) was right to raise the difficulties. While a defence should protect those engaging in legitimate vulnerability scanning or ethical hacking, the defence must be defined in a way that does not encourage vigilante activity or any sort of free-for-all. He suggested as an alternative the idea of using guidance. I must say that, as a lawyer, I slightly shy away from using guidance when the alternative is to put something on the face of a Bill; from a rule of law perspective, that is always more desirable but, again, it is something that I am open to persuasion on.

All these concerns have been recognised by the CyberUp campaign through inclusion in its proposals for various tests, including a competency element, to ensure that only a person engaged in activities covered by the Act who is competent to do so and who has good intent is protected. While it is complicated, I believe that it can be done and should be done.

I finish by again welcoming the debate and the chance to put on record our support for reviewing, revising and updating the 1990 legislation. As I said, we will work constructively on any proposals to do that.

12.15 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. As others have done, I will start by paying tribute to and thanking the hon. Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis) for securing today's important debate and for his ongoing and important role in highlighting some of the issues in this policy space.

Like others, I will start with some humility about the limits of my technical capabilities in this space, while very much recognising that the comments of those who have some background in it have been particularly insightful—I include your comments in that, Sir Mark.

We often describe debates in Westminster Hall as timely, but as the UK faces a threat unlike any other in recent history, and just one day after reports broke that Downing Street itself may have been targeted using Pegasus hacking software, which can turn smartphones into remote listening devices, a renewed focus on the Computer Misuse Act could not be more urgent.

As others have mentioned, the 1990 Act was the first major legislative attempt to tackle cyber-crime and criminalise hacking. The Act strengthened the protection of personal data held by organisations by making it a crime for individuals to gain unauthorised access to that data or to modify it without the necessary permission. Undoubtedly, it was a significant landmark, but given the rate and complexity of technological advance, the Act is long overdue for reform. While it has been amended by more recent legislation, at 30 years old, its contemporary relevance continues to wane.

This policy area moves at such a pace that legislation could be rendered out of date in the time between a new law being drafted and securing Royal Assent, so laws governing this space would require almost constant consideration and review. That is where the statutory guidance plays an important role, as some areas of this must be particularly dynamic. However, with the Act at 30-plus, and without a significant overhaul, we are now

woefully ill-equipped as a country to ensure that we are meeting as robustly as is required the cyber challenges that we face.

In 2020, an estimated 99.99% of total cyber-crime and roughly 99% of reported computer misuse offences went unpunished. That is despite the fact that we know that cyber-crime is significantly under-reported. Coupled with that, there were only 45 prosecutions in 2020 for computer misuse offences. In total, there were 43 convictions, with the average custodial sentence being 15.7 months, and the average fine just £1,203. While there are several reasons for low prosecution rates for cyber-crime—such as jurisdiction, with a great deal of this type of crime being committed abroad—the CMA, with its confusing framework and ambiguous, outdated terminology, presents a further challenge.

I recently met the CyberUp organisation—others have already paid tribute to its work—which was set up in 2020 to campaign for reform of the CMA. It is a broad coalition of supportive bodies from within the cyber-security industry, including the larger cyber consultancies and the cyber industry trade body, techUK, and has the backing of the Confederation of British Industry. Others have cited similar arguments, such as the Criminal Law Reform Now Network, which was launched in 2007 and comprises leading academics, practitioners and legal experts in the field. In its 2020 report, it concluded that the CMA is “crying out for reform”.

Speaking last year at the National Cyber Security Centre, the Home Secretary announced a welcome formal review of the CMA. The result of the call for information was clear, with 66% of respondents saying that they had concerns over the current protections in the Act for legitimate cyber-activity. I understand that the outcome of the review is expected to be published early this summer, so as with others who have spoken today my first question is, can the Minister confirm when we can expect the next step of that review? I would be grateful if he could update Members about that. Given that there is no reference to reform of the CMA in the Government's new national cyber strategy, which was published late last year, many people hope that the review will comprehensively address the areas discussed today and provide a clear position on how we move forward.

As the hon. Member for Bridgend has mentioned, reviewing the CMA in the light of Russia's abhorrent invasion of Ukraine is of even greater importance in order to ensure that our cyber-defence is fit for purpose. As outlined in the 2020 Russia report conducted by the Intelligence and Security Committee,

“Russia's cyber capability, when combined with its willingness to deploy it in a malicious capacity, is a matter of grave concern, and poses an immediate and urgent threat to our national security.”

During evidence provided to the Committee, the NCA explained:

“The Computer Misuse Act...is very outdated legislation. It was designed for a time when we all didn't carry six phones and computers and let alone have criminals who do the same.”

It would therefore seem more than sensible for the Government to accept the report's recommendation that the CMA

“should be updated to reflect modern use of personal electronic devices”,

alongside the report's other recommendations.

[Holly Lynch]

A Government report published just last month and conducted by the UK, the US and other allies exposed the historic malign cyber-activity of Russia's Federal Security Service, including a long list of cyber-operations targeting the UK energy sector, US aviation and a Russian dissident in the UK, who was targeted using sophisticated hacking and spear phishing. Given the historic and increased cyber-threat level, we must consider the concerns of cyber-security professionals who make a strong case that the CMA, in its current form, prevents them from being able to robustly test security systems using some of the most effective methods available to them.

Last month, the former chief executive officer of the UK National Cyber Security Centre warned that our current system

"lacks nuance in protecting people who inevitably have to look into bad things to protect against them."

That argument is further supported by the recent findings of a survey conducted by CyberUp and techUK, which found that 93% of cyber-security professionals believe that

"the Computer Misuse Act did not represent a piece of legislation that was fit for this century"

and 91% of cyber-security businesses felt that

"they had been put at a competitive disadvantage relative to other countries with better legal regimes."

If we do not have a system that our security professionals have confidence in, we do not allow them to robustly defend our security to the best of their abilities.

Having discussed the necessary reasons for reform, it is important to consider what legislative reform would look like and the possible alternatives available to us. One reform, advocated by CyberUp and the Criminal Law Reform Now Network, would introduce a statutory defence to the CMA, using a principles-based framework that would allow cyber-security professionals to defend activities performed in the public interest. I recognise the diverse purposes for interrogating cyber-security, which were raised by the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), and the requirement to ensure that we find the balance in introducing a defence. When an individual is able to demonstrate clearly that they acted to prevent crime or to protect a system or that no personal profit or gains were made, it would seem reasonable and appropriate for that to be recognised in new legislation.

If I have understood the French approach correctly, article 40 of the criminal procedure code allows for a person who is acting in good faith and who acts solely in the national interest by notifying the appropriate body about an existing vulnerability related to the relevant system. That may be a comparison we can look at in order to see how we can best update our legislation.

If we are to ensure that we can protect ourselves from evolving cyber-threats, such as those revealed at the very heart of Government today, the Computer Misuse Act must be reformed as a priority to acknowledge the changes in our technological landscape. When the CMA was drafted, the majority of people did not even have access to a computer, but now we all carry that capacity with us in our pockets. Times have changed, and so must the legislation.

I would be grateful for an outline of the Government's response to the revelations of spyware in Downing Street, and for confirmation that a comprehensive and urgent investigation is under way, as well as for an update on whether any upcoming legislation on countering hostile state actors will operate in this online space and when we might see more detail about those proposals.

Being able to combat threats from hostile cyber-actors in the current geopolitical environment is an essential requirement, and it is our role as legislators to ensure that that is possible. We need the very brightest and best working in the UK cyber-security space; those professionals must have the ability to do their jobs as well as they can if they are to deliver the protections that our country urgently needs.

12.25 pm

The Minister for Security and Borders (Damian Hinds):

It is a pleasure to serve under your expert chairmanship, Sir Mark. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis) for securing today's debate and bringing this important issue to Westminster Hall. I am also grateful to all colleagues who have taken part. It strikes me that this is a good example of bringing to bear on Parliament not just opinions or political points but real depths of expertise from the outside world. I think it has been a very good debate.

I thank the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), and the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), for the constructive way that they engaged with the important discussion. I reassure everybody that it will feed into the review, which I will come back to later. I confirm to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend that I would be pleased to meet with him and a group of colleagues to discuss the issue further—I look forward to it.

As the Minister for Security and Borders, I am keenly aware of the scale of the cyber-crime threat facing our citizens and businesses. Keeping them safe is a key priority for the Government and our operational agencies and I take this opportunity to thank all those who work tirelessly to protect the public.

The threat from cyber-crime has intensified over the last couple of years. As the hon. Member for Halifax said, the pandemic meant that even more of our lives were spent online, and, inevitably, criminals have sought to exploit that shift. The statistics bear out the scale of the threat, with computer misuse now accounting for an estimated 15% of all crime. That opportunism is despicable and underlines how crucial it is that we have a robust and effective response. The Computer Misuse Act is primarily about hacking into someone else's computer, but clearly there are more crimes that involve misusing computers for criminal means—most fraud, for example. Later today we have the Second Reading of the Online Safety Bill, which is an ambitious and forward-looking piece of legislation that will tackle online harms around fraud and fraudulent advertising.

I turn to some of the points made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about protecting individuals and small businesses. I reassure him that comprehensive advice is available from Cyber Aware. We encourage everybody to act on that, starting with three key things: protecting email security with a password made up of three random words; using two-factor

authentication where that is available; and keeping operating systems up to date—often when an update comes around it is to see off some weakness that has been found.

I want to note important steps taken by industry that can make what hacking yields of less utility—things such as the banking sector's deployment of the confirmation of payee system. We have sector charters in place with key industries, including retail banking. While Northern Ireland has a different policing arrangement, in this part of the UK we have the regional and national cyber-resilience centres, supported by policing, to help give extra support and guidance to small businesses that may have less wherewithal to invest in cyber-security expertise.

I also want to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) about skills; he is absolutely right that although the issue is about machines, it is ultimately about people. It is people who improve our defences. There are key pathways and standards in the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education system, including under the cyber-security technologist umbrella and more broadly with the introduction of T-levels. Indeed, the critical T-level is digital business services, which includes a minimum of nine weeks of industry placement. I strongly encourage firms operating in the area—in cyber-security and in-house digital technology—to support that to make sure we all work together to bring on that next generation of experts who will help keep us all safer.

Mr Steve Baker: The Minister has prompted me to recommend a book called “Peopeware”. It is a classic in software engineering and is all about people and how they develop software. One of its points is the orders of magnitude difference between different categories of competence in software engineering. It raises some interesting issues that I am sure he and his officials would find helpful.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I shall add that to my bedtime reading list, which is not uncrowded at present. I will look forward to getting to that.

In the last year, we saw a number of high-profile ransomware attacks around the world, including attacks on local authorities and schools in the UK. The National Cyber Security Centre has reported that in just the first four months of 2021, it handled the same number of ransomware incidents as for the whole of 2020. The National Cyber Security Centre has improved our understanding of the threat and provides a unified source of advice and support to Government and business.

I am afraid that the threat posed by cyber-attacks continues to grow in scale and complexity. That is why the national cyber strategy, mentioned by a number of colleagues and published in December, sets out how the Government will invest £2.6 billion over the next three years to develop a whole-of-society approach to increasing national cyber-security and resilience, including reducing the risk and opportunity for cyber-crimes and disrupting cyber-criminals. As part of that funding, we will continue to invest in the law enforcement cyber-crime network at national, regional and local level. In the face of such a broad and complex threat picture, law enforcement agencies must have the powers they need to investigate online criminality. It is also essential that we have robust legislation in place to enable action to be taken against the perpetrators.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) was right about how much has changed since 1990, and my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness pointed out that the world is more interconnected than ever. Next year, it will be even more interconnected again. All that is correct and we must make sure we are up to date and up to pace. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) pointed out, it is also the case that over the last 30 years, the Computer Misuse Act has generally proven to be a far-sighted piece of legislation for tackling unauthorised access to systems. As the threat has changed, so too has the Act, which has been updated a number of times—most recently in 2015, where the offence of unauthorised acts causing, or creating risk of, serious damage was introduced.

We are firmly and fully committed to ensuring the legislative framework that underpins our efforts to address cyber-crime remains relevant and effective. That is why last May the Home Secretary announced a review of the Computer Misuse Act. The Home Office subsequently launched a call for information, which marked the first step in that process. The purpose of the call for information was to seek views of interested stakeholders across the piece, including in industry, academia and the agencies, on the Act and the associated investigative powers available to law enforcement. The Home Office has received responses covering a range of interesting and complex issues and we are grateful to those who have sent in their views. We are considering the feedback submitted and continue to engage with partners to determine whether changes are needed. We will provide an update on the initial findings of the review shortly.

I want to touch on a couple of key points directly relating to the Act that will influence the approach we take on defences. First, the Act is based on the principle that the owner of the computer and computer data has the right to say who can access it. I want to stress that point, which was made repeatedly during the development of the Act. Authorisation to access a system is the prerogative of the owner. It is that person who is responsible for the operation of the system and bears the cost of securing it.

Equally, the Government are rightly seeking to ensure that system owners take more responsibility for the security of their systems and the content held on them. Therefore it is right that the system owner has the protection of the law from those who obtain or attempt to obtain unauthorised access to computers and their data. We encourage firms to agree to having their systems tested for vulnerabilities by third parties but the fundamental point is that it is the choice of the legal property owner to determine that.

Secondly, we need to ensure that the Act continues to criminalise those who take unauthorised action against computer systems and provides the legal basis for relevant legal authorities to act.

In launching the review, we have been clear that we are open to changes to the Act that enhance our approach to that threat. However, I must also emphasise that any such changes should be well-considered and well-evidenced. We must guard against taking any action that would undermine the ability of law enforcement agencies and prosecutors to investigate criminals and prosecute them.

I have heard the views of Members on defences. My hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness identified the nuance very well, as my hon. Friend the

[*Damian Hinds*]

Member for Wycombe did the nuance of the registration of industry professionals. We are still considering the question of defences, but I am sure that Members would agree with me that we cannot put in place measures that would act as a mechanism for criminals and state actors to hide behind. That is why we need to tread cautiously. An ill-conceived defence could leave prosecutors with the burden of trying to prove a negative, for example, in needing to prove that cyber-attacker X was not, in fact, intending to protect a computer system when they attempted to access it without permission.

It is also worth pointing out that there are already defences in the Act that apply to cyber-security activity. If a person has the authorisation of the system owner to access the system, no offence is committed. In addition, any decision on prosecution is a matter for independent law enforcement and prosecuting agencies who take into account all relevant facts of the case. We must also ensure that any changes to the Act do not permit or encourage retaliatory cyber-activity, sometimes known as “hack back”. There is a danger that such a defence could embolden so-called hacktivists, or commercial entities who wish to offer such services, if they believe their actions could be protected under the law. The UK does not condone unlawful cyber-attacks of any kind.

Some responses to the call for information set out proposals for a review of sentences, and we have also had suggestions for new powers for law enforcement agencies to take action against criminals online. We are considering them as part of the review, including whether sentencing guidelines are needed to ensure that the harms caused by those committing Computer Misuse Act offences are appropriately considered during sentencing.

The hon. Member for Halifax asked a direct question and yes, state threats in this area are absolutely a prevalent and growing issue. I know she would not expect me to give a commentary on a specific security matter, but I want to reassure her and the House that the Government take extremely seriously the question about state capability in this area.

There is absolutely no doubt that the UK needs a Computer Misuse Act that is fit for purpose and can rise to the challenges of the present day. As colleagues know, the Home Office is engaged in a review that is charged specifically with ensuring exactly that.

The context of the war in Ukraine makes that work more important than ever, as the shadow Minister said quite rightly. I am acutely conscious of that, but we cannot rush this. That would only serve to help our adversaries. We are, therefore, approaching the exercise with the careful consideration that the public would expect and which these sometimes complex issues demand. Through the review, and as part of business as usual, we are listening attentively to law enforcement agencies and National Cyber Security Centre experts on what is most likely to enhance our national cybersecurity. Of course, we are also studying the approaches of other countries.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend for securing the debate, which has been interesting and insightful. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to outline our activity in the space and, as I said at the start of my remarks, I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend and colleagues to discuss it further.

12.40 pm

Dr Wallis: I begin my closing remarks by extending my thanks to you, Sir Mark, for being in the Chair, and to all right hon. and hon. Members for their insightful contributions to this timely debate. It is wonderful to see such cross-party engagement on this issue of significance for our national security, and I am pleased about how Members have contributed to a very good debate.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) for raising an important point about humility. He and I both know that expertise a few short years ago probably means a lack of it today—I can certainly attest to that. His comments about the register of professionals were certainly also cause for thought.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for raising points about statutory defence. I think we can get the best of both worlds: it is possible, on our side, to give the reassurances that security professionals want without necessarily legalising what is obviously criminal activity.

I thank the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). When he spoke about smart fridges, he touched on something that I forgot to mention in my speech: however much we think the technological landscape has changed, even more is coming. It was not that long ago that the internet of things was just an idea, and now it is on its way. Everything will have a SIM card and everything will be connected to the internet. Driverless cars, drone deliveries and all those things are coming—they are not pipe dreams; they are currently being developed by someone, somewhere.

I also thank the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cyber security, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell), for his concise and eloquent summary of the case for reform, and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), for introducing comparisons with how other countries have done—she mentioned France—which was very useful.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for his attendance and for his carefully considered response to the points that were raised. I am grateful for his offer to make time available to meet us so that we can begin the important work of well-considered and careful reform.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Computer Misuse Act 1990.

12.43 pm

Sitting suspended.

Business to Business Selling

1 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I will call Mark Pawsey to move the motion and then I will call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered business to business selling and encouraging jobs and growth.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I am delighted to have finally secured this important debate to consider the importance of business-to-business selling, which I will refer to as B2B; why there needs to be a selling revolution; and what needs to be done to upskill the B2B sales workforce—particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises—and to encourage more people to train in B2B selling. Finally, I will set out some measures that the Government could take to encourage professional sales both at home and abroad.

This debate was prompted by my chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group for professional sales and by my 25 years' experience of selling. Like most people who end up in sales, I had no intention of becoming a salesperson. Few people set out to make that their career path, but they end up there through other routes. As a business-to-business salesperson, I spent 25 years driving the motorways of Britain to talk to my customers and understand their needs. As a manager of B2B salespeople, I helped my sales team to win business, grow the business I was working for and drive prosperity.

It is with the benefit of that personal experience that I argue that the UK would not function without business-to-business selling. It is a huge and important part of the economy. In many businesses there is a saying: "Nothing gets made until a salesperson has taken an order." That is the importance of the sector. Since I left the profession to come to Westminster 12 years ago, the job has become more demanding: it requires deep product knowledge but always with a high need for customer insight, empathy, communication skills, collaborative working, strategy and critical thinking.

Why is selling to business important? It is important to the economy and to create wealth, and it supports 10 million jobs. It is skilled work, and it was recently re-categorised as a profession by the Office for National Statistics. That upgrade in status was based on evidence that the majority of B2B sales job postings call for a degree and five years' experience. It is an important fact that 80% of UK businesses make part or all of their turnover from selling to other businesses.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this debate. As a salesman in my father's shop way back in the very early '70s, and then with Henry Denny, a pork products firm in Portadown, I fell into sales by accident, perhaps, but I recognise its importance. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that with trade deals across the world potentially coming through, there is a greater need for more salespeople to push buyers and achieve greater economic growth for all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—always better together?

Mark Pawsey: The hon. Gentleman anticipates many of the points I will make, and he draws attention to the distinction between retail sales and business-to-business sales. I note that he did not set out to go into sales—as I mentioned, few people do.

Business-to-business sales are believed to be 44% of the UK's gross value added—economic output—worth an estimated £1.7 trillion. Companies involved in B2B pay nearly £22 billion in corporation tax and, as I said, employ more than 10 million people. Looking ahead, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the UK will rely on a massive amount of business-to-business selling overseas, to take advantage of the opportunities that we have, having left the European Union, in the development of new markets.

One concern is that there seem to be too few statistics collected about business-to-business sales. There is some confusion between retail sales and B2B sales, despite business-to-business sales being about four times more valuable. When official statistics are collected, no distinction is made between retail sales—what we would call consumer shopping or business-to-consumer sales—and business-to-business selling. That hampers understanding, as the two sectors are very different. Being an effective B2B seller takes skill and experience, whereas a retail sale is often a quick transaction.

Selling to another business is typically a lengthy and complex activity with many people involved on each side, and deals can have multiple stakeholders. For example, if we consider the arrangement of a business-to-business contract for the just-in-time supply of components to an automotive manufacturer, or to supply financial technology to a multinational bank, the salesperson involved will need extensive market insight, an understanding of the customer's needs, good negotiating skills, and often the ability to find solutions to legal and logistical problems. Consider the examples I have just given: B2B sales can be very high when compared with retail sales, and strategic outsourcing contracts can run into billions of pounds and take many years to negotiate. For those reasons, B2B selling requires a professional level of proficiency.

The impact of the pandemic has made it more important for policy makers to distinguish between retail and B2B. We know that jobs in retail are disappearing as consumers move to digital self-service; by contrast, the number of B2B selling roles is steadily growing. Unfortunately, however, many of those posts are hard to fill, and the sector suffers from a skills shortage. We need more and better salespeople to enable us to recover from recession and boost overseas trade. The CBI anticipates that if the UK can achieve its upskilling and retraining needs, that will boost the economy by between £150 billion and £190 billion a year by 2030.

I referred earlier to the all-party parliamentary group for professional sales, and I want to talk about some of the work that we have done. The group was founded in 2018 by Stephen Kerr, who was then the MP for Stirling and is now a Member of the Scottish Parliament. The mission of the all-party group is to

"improve the global recognition of the importance of sales and its impact on the UK economy; to promote and advance the sales profession and boost the success of British industry, especially in international trade."

That is what I am hoping to achieve through this debate. I mentioned that my background led me to become a founding member of the APPG, and as its

[Mark Pawsey]

chairman, I am proud of the work that we have done. In particular, I am proud of two recent policy reports.

The APPG's first inquiry, in 2019, looked at why so many small and medium-sized enterprises were underperforming at this essential business activity. In our report, "The Missing Link: Inquiry into the role of sales in increasing the productivity of small and medium-sized enterprises," we highlighted how many small businesses had too few B2B sales, we mentioned the lack of status of the salesperson within the organisation, and we commented on how slow SMEs in particular were at taking in new technology. We felt that the status issue was stopping good recruits coming into the profession, and we concluded that if we were able to fix some of those problems, it would assist the economy in enjoying significant growth. We stated:

"Our report identifies a critical shortage of professional salespeople that affects every business, but SMEs in particular. It also highlights a negative attitude in Britain towards selling that is holding the economy back. The government needs to intervene to close the skills gap, and to promote a more businesslike attitude towards selling."

I mentioned the impact of the pandemic; shortly after that report was published, covid-19 hit, and it caused a revolution in the way that people sell. Our second report, which we published in March 2021, was entitled, "Supercharging Sales: Investing in B2B selling for jobs and growth," and it looked at the changes that had arisen as a consequence of the pandemic and the lessons that needed to be learned. It made three recommendations—about the need to recognise the importance of B2B selling to the economy, to encourage more entrants into the sales profession at SME level, and to promote better sales skills and greater uptake of digital sales technology.

In our report, we found that the owners of SMEs would need to learn to sell in a new way; no longer would it be suitable to charge up and down the motorway for personal visits. We have seen the adoption of digital technology, but in many cases B2B salespeople have been slow to adapt to that technology. They need to be upskilled, and more of them need to be trained. As an APPG, we called for the Government to tackle the skills shortage; we know that would have a positive impact on the economy.

If businesses embrace a digital landscape and enter a selling revolution, we can grow the economy. We know that digital methods will be important, but when it comes to selling there remains a wide gap between the digital haves—usually big businesses and growth-orientated SMEs—and the digital have-nots, which are usually smaller businesses.

As I have mentioned, SME salespeople have struggled with obstacles that have hindered them from switching smoothly to the digital marketplace. Those obstacles include, in the first instance, a lack of sales skills. Before the pandemic, skilled B2B sellers were in short supply; from March to September 2020, there were 197,000 job postings for B2B sellers, in a profession that numbers only about 540,000 people. We found that the skills deficit was greatest for SMEs, which often do not train their staff.

The second major obstacle to growth was the shortage of management skills. Covid-19 made it urgent for businesses to adjust their sales model, but many business

owners were too busy and needed help developing a strategy. The majority of SME owners are yet to adopt efficiency-oriented management practices and do not use customer relationship management software. The software exists, and it needs to be used. In addition, a lack of understanding of sales often leads SME owners to make mistakes when hiring salespeople, because the business owners themselves do not understand the sales process fully.

The third major obstacle that we identified was a shortage of digital skills. We know that the UK is only 12th among OECD member countries for technology adoption. We also know that covid-19 has spurred many salespeople to use more digital tools. However, SMEs have stopped evolving their tech use, while larger companies have carried on. SMEs will not adopt the next wave of sales technology if they do not first adopt the basics, which are about having a good online presence and using cloud computing and CRM software.

We know that jobs and skills are challenges for the UK economy as we exit the pandemic. New skills will help Britain to commercialise its research and development innovations. We know that we are an innovative country and new skills will facilitate overseas trade. However, we have struggled to recruit and train the B2B salespeople that the economy needs, and we need support from the Government in promoting awareness of and respect for business-to-business selling, and in stimulating demand for sales learning. Such Government support would be very welcome in the sector.

Members of the APPG believe that sales should, at some point, be referenced in the curriculum at school, college and university. There should be more work-based qualifications to create pathways into the profession, and the professional body, the Institute of Sales Professionals, has an aspiration to see a chartered professional body. We would like to see B2B given a higher priority by policy makers in skills and education. There are few Government-supported educational programmes for building commercial sales skills for those entering the workforce, and I am afraid that there is little or no discussion of sales in the MBA courses that are run in this country. That contrasts strongly with US universities that provide the same qualification.

We want the Government to use what influence they have to promote awareness of business-to-business selling and stimulate demand for sales learning, and I have a number of asks for the Minister, which I hope he will respond to in his remarks. The all-party group would like to see more on-the-job learning, and more courses and qualifications in professional sales, which could be backed by the Department for Education—I know that the Minister here today is a Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Minister. We think courses should be eligible for funding under the lifetime skills guarantee. We would like more teachers of sales skills in our further education colleges, and more such teaching in the growth hubs, wherever possible supported by professional people who are actually doing the job. Perhaps there could be more mentoring and support for businesses that are involved in business-to-business sales. Perhaps representatives of the profession could participate in Government and industry advisory groups, as the salesperson is often overlooked.

The all-party group would like to see more apprenticeships. We would like to see the bureaucracy of the Education and Skills Funding Agency cut, with

growth hubs offering support to SME owners. We think the Government could also help by setting national targets for the adoption of proven digital technology by SMEs, including cloud computing and customer relationship management software. Let us provide an incentive for businesses to take on that new technology. SMEs will need some support in funding their training needs. We would be happy for there to be financial incentives for SMEs to do that, and we would like to see extra funding for growth hubs to carry out sales courses and peer networking.

My remarks so far have focused primarily on the domestic need for business-to-business selling, but we must also consider the role that professional sales can play in the international landscape. The Government have an export strategy, which was published by the Department for International Trade on 17 November. Its 12-point plan mentions sales five times, and professional sales are involved in almost all of the 12 points. Approximately one third of the UK economy is international trade, and that is about business-to-business commerce. To be successful on the world stage, we need experts who can compete with salespeople from other countries to ensure that our goods and services are bought in preference to others'.

In the aftermath of the UK's leaving the EU, we have the freedom to trade on our own and in new territories. I know from my business career that new business is not easy to secure, and that certainly is not possible without a competent and skilled team of salespeople. Fulfilling the ambitious trade deals that the Government have put in place will not be possible without those skills. A trade deal is a listing—an entitlement to deal with somebody—but we now need skilled salespeople out in those markets to take advantage of those deals.

As the Government's priorities shift away from job retention and towards retraining people for the skilled jobs of the future, B2B sales must be a top priority for the UK. There will be massive benefits if we can ensure that SMEs adopt digital sales technology and gain professional skills. The pandemic has presented us with an opportunity to look afresh at difficult economic problems. Much of the cost of upskilling can be borne by employers, but I reiterate our ask for Government action to encourage that training by signalling the importance of sales skills.

Many positive benefits will flow to the UK if we can get businesses to adopt these new skills and gain new abilities. If we can turn around our attitudes and upskill our workforce, business-to-business selling will be a major force enabling us to grow our economy, create jobs and build new markets overseas. The cry should be: "Let's get out there, and let's get selling." I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

1.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) for securing this debate so that we can highlight the fantastic work that British industry and businesses do every day throughout the year. The ability to talk about that even for a few minutes is a great opportunity to celebrate their fantastic work.

I congratulate the APPG and my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby, who chairs it, on the work done under his chairmanship and under the chairmanship of the much-missed former Member for Stirling, who we all wish was still in his place. I was at the initial APPG meeting. I admit this was not an area of huge knowledge to me, but the former Member for Stirling was looking for Members to attend and managed to achieve quite a large number at the initial meeting. That was a testament to the former Member's powers of persuasion and to the continuing ability of my hon. Friend to highlight this important issue.

I was involved in business for most of my career prior to coming to this place five years ago, so I have a little bit of experience in business-to-business selling. I used to be a management consultant and I would try to find somebody else who could do the business-to-business sales because I was not particularly good at it. I also worked in a bank for several years, building processes so that we could sell financial products to businesses. That brought home to me the importance of capable and competent individuals—and they were not easy to find, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby has correctly indicated. They have an incredibly difficult skillset, and I am in awe of those people who can walk into a room and sell at the level of technicality, competence and ability that so many B2B and professional salesmen have.

Such a skill takes many years to hone. We have an understanding in government that that skill is difficult to procure and not easily taught. It is often learnt on the job, but it is hugely important. My hon. Friend pointed out the difference between retail sales and business-to-business sales, which are often merged together but should be considered separately because they have very different skillsets. From a BEIS perspective, I assure my hon. Friend that the Department absolutely recognises the importance and value of business-to-business selling in the UK.

We know that the sector has been through a significant challenge, as every sector has, over the past couple of years. The pandemic has brought many difficulties for businesses and sectors all around the country, so I will take this opportunity to thank the sector for its work, its efforts and its contribution to the UK during that difficult time. I affirm that the Government value and wish to continue to support the sector where they can.

We have near full employment and lots of vacancies, but there are challenges regarding the skills that are more difficult to procure and create in the type of selling that we are talking about. In the past couple of years, gaps have appeared or been exacerbated. Covid has taught us that many business activities can be conducted successfully anywhere and that technology can allow us to get past geographical barriers, but ultimately it is the sales and the techniques that are hugely important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby highlighted the international opportunities to go out and sell UK plc if we have the right skillsets in UK businesses to do so. We are proud to have already delivered a trade agreement with the EU, which came into force last year and has been debated many times in this place and beyond. It is the first that the EU has signed that grants tariff-free and quota-free access to its market, ensuring that British businesses can continue to have a strong trading relationship with our European neighbours and

[Lee Rowley]

build on the skills that we have been talking about. It is the most liberal market access that either party grants to any trading partner, and gives us opportunities to sign new trade deals—the first opportunity in 50 years.

We have already signed trade deals with Japan, Australia and New Zealand, and this gives us the opportunity to use the skills already in place in UK plc and to seek new opportunities as we build that skillset even further. We will continue to support British businesses to be able to make that case all around the world—not just in the EU, but in all the new markets that are opening—through measures such as the 12-point plan, which will support SMEs to manage import controls, and the export support service, which provides a single point of entry and support for businesses exporting to Europe.

We have included a chapter dedicated to protecting the interests of SMEs in the trade and co-operation agreement, and have various helplines for customs and international trade. All those measures seek to give our businesses and salespeople, and the B2B people who are selling in and around these markets, the tools and the ability to help them with the knowledge and expertise to do what they do best—to find business and help UK businesses grow.

I turn to the importance of skills and productivity in sales. My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby is right to highlight the maxim that nothing gets made until a salesperson ultimately takes an order. There is the challenge of building skills in those who are just coming into the workforce, and of augmenting skills for those who are already there.

B2B sales can be a dynamic and lucrative business activity, which can attract young talent. It is for employers, ultimately, to convey the benefits of those roles for prospective workers. The Government are keen to highlight the opportunities in the B2B market, and the abilities and fantastic capabilities in UK plc. As Minister for industry, I look forward to doing more where I can, and I know that my colleagues elsewhere, in BEIS and beyond, are also keen to do so.

Mark Pawsey: Does the Minister think that having a chartered status for sales professionals would raise the esteem of the sector, and encourage more bright and capable people to consider it as a career option?

Lee Rowley: That is an interesting question, and one that many industries are debating. There is huge value in chartered status and the accreditation that it provides.

At the same time, we must ensure that in creating those things—I am sure it will not be the case in this sector—barriers to entry are not raised at the same time, as that could exacerbate some of the challenges that my hon. Friend has rightly highlighted throughout the debate.

In the few moments I have left, I will touch on productivity and highlight the importance of the schemes already in place, such as Help to Grow: Digital and Help to Grow: Management. Help to Grow: Digital provides businesses with free, impartial online support and guidance on how the digital technology that my hon. Friend rightly highlights can boost their performance. Up to 100,000 eligible businesses can take advantage of discounts of up to 50%, worth up to £5,000, to buy some of the basic productivity-enhancing tools highlighted by my hon. Friend, such as customer relationship management and accountancy software.

On top of that, Help to Grow: Digital enables people to consider the best way, from an e-commerce perspective, to help businesses make the best of selling online. That will be useful for many people, but does not take away from the important point—highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—about people understanding what they are selling and having the capability, competence and technical knowledge to do so.

This has been a hugely important, if quick, debate. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and the APPG for continuing their important work in this sector. There are parts of commerce that do not often speak as loudly as others; they just get on with the job and do brilliant work, day in and day out. This is one of those examples—people who are really pushing UK plc to do more. They are working through how we can grow, do better, and collectively take on more jobs. I congratulate the sector on all the work it has quietly done over so many years; as the Minister for industry, I offer my personal support.

If it is helpful to my hon. Friend, I am happy to talk to the APPG on a different occasion, in more detail, about how we can work together on this issue. I am keen, if we can, to do a visit—or something along those lines—so that we can see, publicise and highlight all the great work in this sector, which has done so much over recent years to put UK plc in such a good position, and will continue to do so in the years ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

1.29 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Pandemic: Royal Mail Services

[RUSHANARA ALI *in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Royal Mail services and the covid-19 pandemic.

It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Ms Ali. This is the third debate that I have secured on the performance of Royal Mail in as many years. I have done so because, as a company, Royal Mail is continuing to fail residents and businesses in my constituency and in many places across the country.

Royal Mail provides a vital frontline service. Throughout the covid-19 pandemic, postal workers continued to go to work to deliver letters and parcels, and, in addition to their core responsibilities, often provided vital contact for vulnerable residents living on their own during lockdown. I pay tribute to their bravery, dedication and service. I regularly meet postal workers in my constituency and representatives from their union, the Communication Workers Union. I am absolutely clear that the issue at Royal Mail is a failure of management and that the problems are structural.

The problems with Royal Mail first came to prominence in my constituency in 2017 when it announced plans to close two delivery offices in my constituency: the SE22 delivery office on Silvester Road and the SE27 delivery office on Windsor Grove. It was clear to local residents and elected representatives that the closures would be a disaster for postal delivery services. Following a large campaign, Royal Mail decided not to close the SE27 delivery office, but it pressed ahead with the closure of the SE22 office in autumn 2018, shortly before Christmas.

The closure of the SE22 delivery office heralded a disastrous deterioration in the reliability of postal services for local residents in the SE22 area. The delivery office was merged with the SE15 delivery office in Peckham, which is too small to cope with the volume of parcels for two postcode areas. It is located a considerable distance from the furthest parts of SE22 and the area has challenging topography. When the office initially closed, it is no exaggeration to say that services collapsed, with many streets not receiving postal deliveries for days or weeks at a time and customers having to queue for hours to pick up parcels. The situation was completely chaotic.

Following the initial Christmas peak in 2018, services improved somewhat, but ever since that time it has been clear that Royal Mail has no resilience in the SE15 delivery office and can maintain a satisfactory level of service only when all conditions are optimal. Whenever there are any increased pressures due to peak periods, staff sickness or adverse weather, the service in large parts of SE22 quickly becomes completely unreliable.

The consequences of poor and unreliable postal delivery services for my constituents have been severe. I have heard from constituents who have missed medical appointments or, perhaps even worse during the pandemic, turned up at hospital for appointments that had been cancelled. They have lost important legal documents and have had to attend court because they missed the deadline for paying speeding fines.

During the pandemic there have been many heart-rending stories that illustrate the important role that postal services still play in people's lives, including children not receiving any birthday cards during lockdown, handmade gifts from grandparents for newborn babies not being delivered, and residents who have been relying on post from family and friends to fend off loneliness and isolation waiting weeks at a time for their post.

In addition, my constituency is home to the Mark Allen Group—a magazine publisher that produces 114 publications, including *Farmers Weekly*, which is delivered nationwide on Fridays. The publisher has highlighted the unreliability of postal delivery services in many parts of the country as a serious threat to the viability of its business. It has noticed significant subscription cancellations, which correspond with unreliable postal delivery services.

Magazine publishers are worth £3.74 billion to the UK economy and employ more than 55,000 people. The Mark Allen Group in my constituency supports hundreds of jobs in journalism, printing and distribution. It is reliant on Royal Mail for the sustainability of its business. It is no exaggeration to say that the Royal Mail failures are putting jobs at risk. Citizens Advice, the consumer advocate for the postal sector, also confirms that the kinds of failures seen in my constituency are common across the country. It estimates that 16.5 million customers were hit by letter delays in January 2021, and 15 million were left waiting for letters during the festive period 2021–22. It also highlights the rapidly increasing cost of Royal Mail services. The price of a first-class stamp has increased by almost 50% in just five years, leaving customers paying much more for a poorer service.

I have engaged extensively with Royal Mail, the CWU and Ofcom since 2017 about the problems in SE22, and during the covid-19 pandemic problems in other postcode areas in my constituency, especially SE19, SE24 and SE27. My engagement with Ofcom has been, frankly, extremely disappointing. There appeared to be very little interest in the severe problems affecting my constituents, and no meaningful action that Ofcom, as the regulator, was willing or able to take in response. It is clear to me that there are considerable problems with the regulatory framework that have made it impossible for Royal Mail to be held to account when its services fail.

I believe that five measures are urgently needed to put this situation right. There is currently no requirement on Royal Mail to undertake public consultation on a decision to close a delivery office, despite the obvious significant impact that a closure can have on a local community. In the case of SE22, every single concern that local residents raised about the closure has come to pass. Royal Mail sold the SE22 delivery office for £7 million. There was no requirement to reinvest any of the receipt in the provision of local services. I urge the Minister to ask Ofcom to introduce a new requirement for meaningful public consultation on delivery office closures, and to instigate an independent analysis of the impact on local services that must be submitted to Ofcom and signed off before a closure can take place. We will not accept further delivery office closures in Dulwich and West Norwood.

Royal Mail is required only to report quality of service data at the level of the first part of the postcode. That has consistently meant that the catastrophically poor performance in SE22 and other postcodes in my

[Helen Hayes]

constituency has been masked by performance data across the wider SE postcode area, which covers a vast swathe of south-east London. In effect, that has made it impossible to secure any regulatory action for my constituents. I have made repeated requests over a number of years for Royal Mail to provide more granular performance data, and they have always been refused. That gives rise to concerns about transparency and accountability. I urge the Minister to ask Ofcom to require Royal Mail to report performance data at the level of local postcodes, so that regulatory action can be taken more easily on individual delivery offices when they fail.

The partial suspension of the universal service obligation during the pandemic effectively removed all regulatory levers from Ofcom in relation to Royal Mail. Across many streets in my constituency, residents have reported periods when post was not delivered for weeks at a time. When I raised those problems with Royal Mail, it systematically denied the extent of the problem, refused to acknowledge backlogs of mail sitting in delivery offices—that miraculously were cleared when I made a short-notice visit to at least one of the delivery offices in question—and denied the extent of the gaps in delivery.

I am completely clear that Royal Mail has regularly been in breach of the USO in my constituency, but there has been no action from Ofcom, leaving Royal Mail entirely unaccountable for the quality of its services. The Government must therefore require Ofcom to review the universal service obligation to ensure that meaningful regulatory action can always be taken when there are breaches and, in circumstances in which the USO is partially or fully suspended, that there is no vacuum of regulation.

Finally, it is unacceptable for the public to be asked to pay more for less, particularly at a time when the cost of living crisis is bearing down on so many people across the country. I ask the Minister to respond to the request from Citizens Advice and to ask Ofcom to carry out a full assessment of the affordability of postal products, in the light of the jump in first-class stamp prices. My constituents are utterly exasperated by the lack of action from Royal Mail, Ofcom and the Government in response to the failures of Royal Mail in my constituency. The privatisation of this vital public service by the Tories and the Lib Dems has failed. The Government must urgently get a grip.

4.39 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this important debate. I would like to associate myself with the appreciative comments she made about postal workers.

My experience of postal deliveries came with my first opportunity to visit sorting offices in my constituency last Christmas, after covid restrictions were relaxed. I visited the sorting offices in Carlton and Arnold in Gedling. I was struck by the very close working conditions under which postal workers operate when sorting the post, working cheek by jowl. Although there was a

good working atmosphere in both sorting offices, I congratulate them on their tenacity for working in such difficult conditions throughout the pandemic; it must have been a very difficult time.

The service in Arnold has remained very good, but there were serious concerns about delivery of post in Carlton. Medical appointment letters arrived after the appointment date, and birthday cards arrived late. A useful indicator of whether an individual or the system is at fault is the arrival of cards; when several birthday cards arrive after a birthday, that is a useful indicator that the system itself is at fault.

Some of my constituents received 10 or 14 days-worth of post at the same time, in one go after a long gap. That was initially ascribed to staff shortages and so forth as a result of covid, but on further investigation that seemed not necessarily to be the prime mover. Particularly at Carlton, new walk routes had been introduced and implemented because that sorting office was serving a lot more points than previously. Once the new system was implemented, it stuttered on day one, and a lot of work was required to resolve significant teething problems and iron out that problem, to get back to an acceptable level of service.

I had good meetings with Royal Mail on the matter. I also praise the members of the Communication Workers Union I met to discuss it. I hope that, as a Conservative MP, I do not damage their street cred too much by singling out Ian Pointer and Steve Blower for particular praise, as they gave me a thorough and considered briefing on the subject. As I stand here today, it looks as though the problems in Carlton have simmered somewhat. I am gaining significantly fewer emails in my inbox on the subject, so it appears to be resolved.

I want to use this opportunity to thank Royal Mail and its staff, who have worked so hard to resolve the issues in Carlton, and for stepping up to meet that challenge in difficult circumstances.

4.43 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Ali. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this important debate. Like her, I thank the staff at Royal Mail for their hard work in keeping communities connected throughout the covid pandemic. It was such a difficult time for everybody, but they continued to strive to work extremely hard, delivering parcels throughout my constituency of Cynon Valley.

As others have mentioned, I have a good connection with local postal workers, especially the trade union representatives. I make particular mention of Amarjite Singh, branch secretary for south-east Wales, and our local CWU rep, Jason Richards, who has been instrumental in the re-establishment of our trades council locally, which is fantastic.

Over the past two years, during periods of widespread lockdown or personal isolation, Royal Mail deliveries have been a lifeline and kept people supplied, including with the special delivery of coronavirus test kits. The postal workers were part of the key worker service provision that kept the country running, even when many of them suffered from covid; we have to thank them for their work.

As has been outlined, the difficulties in meeting delivery targets during the pandemic were understandable from the perspective of postal workers. Increased parcel volumes, social distancing requirements, and staff absences were all contributory factors. The suspension of Royal Mail's regulatory targets as a designated universal service provider in 2020-21 was a welcome move. The service came in for much criticism and many complaints, which had a detrimental impact on the morale of staff, who—from my significant dealings with them—are absolutely committed to providing a high-quality service.

Three areas of concern have been brought to my attention that could assist in securing a return to the delivery of a world-class postal service if work were undertaken. The first relates to covid and staff sickness. While over the past two years employees battled with the impact of covid, Royal Mail discounted covid absences from the sickness absence procedure. With restrictions having lifted, that is no longer the case. Given the public-facing nature of the work involved and the close working environment, it is essential to ensure that in all instances, both staff and the public are adequately protected from the risks of covid. Although I understand Royal Mail's policy is that staff are advised to remain at home if they have covid symptoms or test positive, I would be most concerned—as, I am sure, would other Members—if there were evidence that practice did not always follow that policy. Staff should never feel pressured to come into work in such circumstances. I would be interested to hear the Minister's views on that.

The second area relates to steps to improve service provision, service quality and standards. It is welcome to hear that the CWU and Royal Mail recently set up a joint national quality of service steering group to monitor progress and address any barriers to achieving quality of service objectives. In my opinion, Royal Mail should be provided with more regulatory freedom to innovate, grow, and improve postal services. Allowing Royal Mail to introduce tracking facilities for a universal postal service is a key action that Ofcom could take to improve postal services. Ofcom is opposed to that, but the CWU argues that tracking in the universal service obligation would deliver better outcomes for customers and ensure that the USO evolves with user expectations. Further, it is essential that Royal Mail is reunited with the Post Office and returned to public ownership. An integrated postal, retail and delivery network would boost postal revenue potential and service quality, thereby benefiting customers.

The final area relates to job security, staffing levels, and terms and conditions. Recent media coverage reports that Royal Mail is planning to sack about 900 managers and bring in lower rates of pay in what Unite the union has said is another case of fire and rehire. The Royal Mail workforce is already depleted, having suffered in excess of 1,500 job cuts in 2021, leaving the service seriously understaffed and struggling to meet targets. A recent survey of Unite members revealed that the service depends on the willingness of members to undertake unpaid work, with members readily going without lunch breaks, working unpaid at weekends and even forgoing annual leave to provide the quality service that those workers want to provide to constituents.

Unite the union claims that job cuts are driven by shareholder greed—a view I share—despite the service having returned a record £311 million in profits, and that the business's real plan is to eventually cut the

six-day delivery service altogether and move to a three-day service model, as is the case in European countries such as Denmark. Sharon Graham has called on Royal Mail to step back from making any cuts. In her words:

“Royal Mail has no excuse for announcing these job cuts, especially at the same time as introducing ‘new’ bands on lower pay. That is just ‘fire and rehire’. They are not even losing money. Royal Mail's private shareholders are doing very nicely...This is shameless boardroom greed looking to ruin a great UK name and a 500-year-old essential service.”

In this cost of living crisis, it would be remiss of me not to say that staff deserve an inflation-proof pay rise. CWU workers in Wales have relayed to me their concerns about the pay discussions in Royal Mail and have written to the Royal Mail Group chief executive in February and, following the lack of response, published an open letter to bring the union's concerns into the open. The union made it clear that it found the delay in announcing the pay offer unacceptable given the cost of living crisis, and that the company is undermining trust.

Local CWU members are very aware that the business recently paid dividends to its shareholders to the tune of £400 million. Indeed, as of January 2022, a total of £1,725 million had been paid out in dividends to Royal Mail shareholders since privatisation by the Conservative-Lib Dem Government in 2013. I therefore fully support the CWU's calls for Royal Mail to be renationalised, which would allow for the money paid in dividends to shareholders to be reinvested in the business to retain staff, fund a significant pay rise, which the staff deserve, support growth and improve service quality.

I would like to know whether the Minister supports the call for an inflation-proof pay rise for postal workers, and indeed all key workers. That is, I believe, the right and necessary thing to do in this current crisis. Diolch yn fawr.

4.50 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing the debate and I associate myself with the words of appreciation for postal workers that have already been expressed.

The recent postal disruption in my constituency hit a peak in the latter half of last year, so unsurprisingly much of the correspondence I received centred on its impact on the festive season, with Christmas cards and presents sent in November not arriving until the new year. I first got in touch with Royal Mail about my concerns about the Amersham sorting office in September 2021. The original responses were inadequate. It initially assured me that the delays were temporary and that, although reduced, service to the affected areas was still regular and being delivered rotationally every other day. Based on the testimonies of constituents shared with me in the following weeks, that was in no way an accurate representation of the situation on the ground.

One elderly constituent missed two long-awaited hospital appointments as the letters did not arrive until after the appointments were scheduled. Another told me that they ended up in rent arrears and debt after a delay in the delivery of a bank card. The same constituent was left without any form of identification as they waited for a new driving licence and the other identity documentation to be returned to them.

[Sarah Green]

Of course, we all understand that Royal Mail has been dealing with a pandemic, and I am well aware of the difficulties caused by staff absences as a result. I understand why Ofcom decided to grant an exemption to Royal Mail's universal service obligation, but the level of service we have been left with in places has been completely unacceptable. A few days' delay is one thing; a month's is another. If exemptions are granted, there should be an obligation to clarify what is and is not acceptable.

Royal Mail conceded that, as well as the pandemic and staff shortages, the difficulties at Amersham sorting office related to changes to the delivery rounds. It transpired that entire streets were missed off the routes, so some people were getting no mail at all. I have been in regular contact with Royal Mail about that since the autumn, and by the end of January things were largely in a much better place, but I have started to receive the same messages about postal delays to my inbox all over again. That is nothing to do with the exceptionally committed postal workers; there is something going wrong at a higher level.

I echo my colleagues' calls for more detailed data, broken down at a more focused level. It is clear that reporting does not paint an accurate enough picture. In my area, the most severe disruption focused on the HP6, HP7 and HP8 areas. To ensure a more consistent service, Ofcom must require Royal Mail to provide more detailed data in order to root out the problems plaguing service delivery. Holding Royal Mail to account is desperately needed. The hard-working postal workers I have spoken to are not responsible for the backlog they are trying to clear.

4.54 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Ali. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing this important debate, following an unprecedented two years in which Royal Mail staff worked at the coalface of the pandemic to ensure that vital services continued and that our country remained connected. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and, in particular, to my membership of trade unions.

As with all key workers, we owe Royal Mail's workforce a debt of gratitude for performing heroically in the face of the covid crisis, which claimed the lives of many of their colleagues on the frontline. I also thank the Communication Workers Union for its leadership throughout that period, ensuring that the concerns of all Royal Mail staff were listened to and acted on. The CWU always works tirelessly, and never more so than in the past two years, when it has ensured that the interests of all postal workers—including health and safety concerns—were listened to. The CWU and all Royal Mail staff have gone above and beyond to serve our communities throughout the pandemic.

My local branch—the CWU North West Central Amalgamated Branch, which represents more than 2,500 postal workers—continued despite sadly losing one of its own members to covid. Mr Ian Wilson was based at the Royal Mail delivery centre in my constituency. His death left an enormous hole in the union, which he first

joined in 1978 before working as a Royal Mail driver in Stockport. Ian was a loyal, hard-working public servant who was liked by everybody he came into contact with. He continues to be missed dearly by all those who knew and loved him.

Local CWU branch secretary Mr Dave Kennedy was forced to source and fund PPE himself from a local company early on in the pandemic. I thank Dave and all CWU branch officers for their work on that. The lack of PPE at the start of the pandemic remains nothing short of a disgrace. Royal Mail staff always deliver for our country and never more so than during the pandemic, when it was awarded the Government contract for the testing programme; staff had to work around the clock, seven days a week, to deliver and collect test kits from households, playing an enormous role in helping to contain the spread of the virus. They often did so in the face of considerable hurdles. When social distancing restrictions were in place, only one member of staff was allowed per van, which led to a shortage of vehicles and instances of staff members being forced to walk—in one case, up to 3 miles—before starting a shift. The efforts of the CWU's cleaning membership in sterilising all vehicles, touchpoints and work areas undoubtedly also helped to limit the spread of the virus.

The already challenging situation was made worse by a lack of support by senior management. Royal Mail did not take advantage of the furlough scheme for clinically extremely vulnerable staff members. Instead, it recorded any resulting absences as sickness absences, which led to members exhausting their sick pay entitlement and suffering significant financial hardship. Instead of supporting the workforce, Royal Mail bosses directed sick staff members to a national charity for help. It was only after many weeks of the pandemic—and following the intervention of the CWU—that the situation was resolved.

Things could have been very different if Royal Mail had remained in public hands and the bottom line was not what mattered most to its senior leadership. It remains a national tragedy that the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition Government sold off one of the UK's crown jewels in 2014—the biggest privatisation since that of the railways in 1994, when the Conservative Administration flogged off another of our country's greatest assets.

Almost a decade on from the sale and millions of recklessly wasted taxpayer pounds later, there remains no justification for having privatised the organisation. As we all know, Royal Mail was making a profit and providing a high-quality public service to everyone in the UK. That profit now goes straight to private shareholders, with £800 million lining their pockets between 2013 and 2017 alone. Research by We Own It and the New Economics Foundation revealed that, by 2025—just a decade after the sale—the country will be worse off than if Royal Mail had remained public. Almost 70% of the public support a publicly owned Royal Mail, which, research shows, would save us £171 million a year—enough to open 342 new Crown post offices with post banks. It is time to bring Royal Mail back into public hands, where it belongs.

Scandalously, we have seen a nationwide attack against Crown post office branches. The Royal Mail is not to blame for that; this short-sighted Government are. I am proud to have a Crown post office branch in my

constituency, just a short walk from my constituency office. My community needs that branch, and I will do all I can to stop its closure. It is staffed by unionised civil servants, unlike the concessions often operated by retail brands, which simply do not offer all the services of a Crown branch.

Last year, following the CWU's "Save our Post Office" campaign, I was delighted that controversial franchising plans for my local branch were overturned. Crown branches are at the heart of many communities like my own, and we must ensure that other branches are not relocated or downgraded to a retail partner.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) that the Royal Mail and the Post Office should be integrated and come under public ownership. I also agree with the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood.

Once again, I want to take this opportunity to place on record my thanks to all Royal Mail staff, CWU members and the Communication Workers Union for consistently going above and beyond to keep our country connected at a time when it faced the very real prospect of being ground to a halt by covid. Their efforts will not be forgotten. I thank them on behalf of my constituents.

4.59 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to service under your chairship today, Ms Ali. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this important debate and thank all hon. Members who have spoken. I will reflect almost all their comments in my remarks this afternoon.

The postal industry is hugely important to the well-being of our country. The covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of the service and of its workforce. For the past two years, Royal Mail workers have selflessly provided key services delivering vaccinations, shielding letters, covid-19 tests and PPE items, as well as enabling people to communicate with their loved ones when they were unable to visit them in person. It is right that today we have heard hon. Members across the House recognise them for their extraordinary efforts. It is also important that we review together how we can better hold Royal Mail management to account. I want to mention one of my constituents, Councillor Poonam Dhillon, who was a dedicated Royal Mail worker who sadly died of covid last year.

Royal Mail has a long and storied history dating back to 1516, roughly taking the shape that we know today in the 19th century with the introduction of the first stamp in 1840 and with the first pillar box erected in 1852. Those were important reforms, as was the setting of a duty on the postal service across our islands that Royal Mail must deliver to every address in the UK six days a week at a uniform price.

The Postal Services Act 2011 gave a statutory basis to the universal service order, which defines what should be considered part of the universal postal service. The Act sets out the minimal requirements that Royal Mail must deliver. The USO can be amended by Ofcom, which designates regulatory conditions, including pricing and performance targets.

The Royal Mail is the UK's universal services provider, which is a sign of the respect and trust we have placed in the postal service in our country. A character in a book

by Anthony Trollope, the Victorian novelist who also invented the pillar box, once exclaimed of the stamp: "Surely this little Queen's head here can't be untrue!"

Trust matters, yet trust in this very significant public service has been significantly weakened since Royal Mail was privatised by the coalition Government in 2014. The Business, Innovation and Skills Committee at the time concluded that it had been undervalued in that sale by David Cameron's Government—to the tune of £1 billion to the taxpayer.

What was the result? In 2020-21, Royal Mail significantly missed its targets that a minimum of 93% of first-class mail is delivered the next working day and a minimum of 98.5% of second-class mail is delivered within three working days. Just 74.7% of first-class mail and 93.7% of second-class mail met those service targets.

Although we all acknowledge the unique conditions of the pandemic, during which sickness eroded staffing levels and isolation increased the parcel load, data from Citizens Advice's 2022 state of the sector report suggests that the service has not recovered. It found that at the beginning and end of 2021, letter delays were widespread across the country. During Christmas last year, almost 15 million people were left waiting for post. Over half of those reported going at least a week without letters, as we have heard today.

In previous debates, Members have complained about mail arriving late for their constituents and, worryingly, the Citizens Advice report also found that one in 14 UK adults had experienced serious negative consequences of struggling to receive their post, missing important documents such as insurance letters or fines. Last July, Royal Mail committed to returning to pre-pandemic quality by the end of August, but as the CA report makes clear, it did not. In response to this persistent failure to meet its targets, Ofcom has told Royal Mail that it must take steps to improve performance as the effects of the pandemic subside.

May I ask the Minister what expectations the Government have of Royal Mail for the timescale in which its performance will return to pre-pandemic levels? Will he tell the House what discussions he has had with Ofcom about the next steps for Royal Mail, and say what potential repercussions Royal Mail executives could face if they do not meet their targets?

Although Ofcom has the power to fine Royal Mail, as it did in response to missed delivery targets in 2018 and 2019, more stringent measures might need to be taken. A further significant issue has been the closure of Royal Mail delivery offices and the impact of such closures in some areas is still very much ongoing. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood has been a dedicated campaigner for her constituency ever since the SE22 delivery office was closed in 2018. She spoke very powerfully about that closure in her speech today. Despite being warned by my hon. Friend and community stakeholders that that closure would make delivery more difficult, Royal Mail pressed forward and closed the delivery office in East Dulwich anyway. That decision continues to impact the performance and services that local businesses and residents are receiving. My hon. Friend has also talked about there being no resilience in the SE15 service, and the poor and unreliable services for a range of her constituents. We need to look at the measures that have been raised today, including reporting at a more detailed postcode level, because transparency is not the enemy of democracy.

[Seema Malhotra]

Royal Mail's recent history has raised concern that it seems to be driven by a mission to increase dividends for shareholders ahead of genuinely fulfilling its responsibilities as the nation's universal service provider. Following the cuts of 2,000 managerial roles in 2020-21, in January this year Royal Mail revealed plans to cut a further 1,000 management jobs. Although Royal Mail has said that cuts are intended to streamline operational management and to improve focus on performance at a local level, they come in a year of record-breaking profits for shareholders and an increase in the cost of first-class stamps of nearly 12%. At the same time, Royal Mail will bring in a lower-paid managerial role, in a move that Unite the union has compared to fire and rehire practices. That is absurd at a time when the service is already struggling to meet basic performance targets and when data suggests that Royal Mail has the capital needed to make investments without such a scale of job losses.

Will the Minister say what discussions he has had with Royal Mail and the relevant trade unions—Unite and the Communication Workers Union—about the scale of job losses? Has he discussed the service's prospective plan to streamline operational management in terms of equipment, transformation for future business and staffing? Does he recognise the work of the unions, including the CWU's acknowledgement of the need for modernisation? That need is understood: unions want to work with management to reform an organisation that their members work for with pride.

May I also ask the Minister whether he has considered the CWU's proposal to integrate a high level of corporate social responsibility on environmental issues and employment standards into the postal regulatory framework? What discussions has he had about the affordability of postal products?

We need better communication with Parliament. As Royal Mail moves into a new regulatory framework for 2022 to 2028, I want it to be open to better communications with Parliament, stakeholders and communities. Although Royal Mail is technically independent of Government and overseen by Ofcom, it remains an essential public service. Yet it has been hit by a decade-high rate of more than 1 million complaints and high sickness absence rates. There were boosts otherwise for shareholders last year, as parcels helped Royal Mail to achieve a £311 million profit. For that reason, Labour will continue to call for Royal Mail to be held more strongly to account, for the Government to actively listen to the debate and for a better postal service in all parts of our nation, as the public expect and demand.

5.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing today's important debate about Royal Mail's services and the covid-19 pandemic. Clearly, this is not the first time that we have discussed the issues—the ongoing issues—in her constituency. I am sure that we will continue the conversation, and it is important that we do, so I am

glad that she has had the chance to air her views in this debate. I hope that Royal Mail continues to respond and to engage constructively with her.

Before discussing the level of service overall, I would like to provide some context, outlining both the importance of and the pressures on postal services in the lead-up to the debate. We have heard today that the postal service has played a critical role in helping to mitigate the impact of coronavirus on individuals, families and businesses across the UK. We absolutely recognise that postal workers have been working incredibly hard to meet demand and deliver the universal service in incredibly difficult circumstances. We all rely on them to keep people connected across the country by delivering the letters and parcels that are so important to everyday life, and supporting the economy in these difficult times.

As the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood is aware, Royal Mail's contingency plans to mitigate disruption to postal services are well established. They are overseen by Ofcom, the independent regulator, which has been raised, so it is for Ofcom to monitor service levels, although Royal Mail has reassured Government that it has been doing everything it can to maintain service levels during the pandemic. I do look out for and try to support hon. Members' inquiries with Royal Mail when those are raised, as has been the case today—for example, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) raised the situation there.

Royal Mail has set out that improving service levels is its No. 1 priority at this stage, so although the situation is improving, it is clear that there are still issues that need to be addressed in certain areas. I do expect Ofcom to continue to challenge the business, under its regulatory framework, to ensure that it is delivering the best possible service. It was disappointing to hear otherwise from the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood about the policy of engagement with Ofcom, which she said was missing in her exchanges. That is certainly regrettable to hear.

Overall—looking at the wider picture—customers continue to be satisfied with Royal Mail's services. Ofcom's last annual monitoring report, for 2020-21, which was published in December of last year, found that more than eight in 10 residential customers and around eight in 10 SME users are satisfied with Royal Mail. Those results are in line with Ofcom's findings in its review of user needs published in November 2020. That general satisfaction is despite the challenges of delivering postal services during a pandemic.

The statutory framework recognises that, in an emergency, Royal Mail may not be able to sustain the universal postal service without interruption, suspension or restriction. I hope that hon. Members will agree that it was reasonable for Ofcom to acknowledge in this context that the pandemic was indeed an emergency. Therefore Royal Mail was legitimately able to modify its obligations, including by reducing the frequency of letter deliveries temporarily, for six weeks, in 2020. However, Ofcom's declared emergency regulatory period ended on 31 August 2021 as Royal Mail implemented its improvement plan. Normal regulatory requirements have since applied, although in monitoring compliance Ofcom needs to take account of any relevant matters beyond Royal Mail's control that may impact on its performance. Throughout the pandemic, Royal Mail

has been transparent about any changes to the services that it provides; that information can be found on the Royal Mail website.

Royal Mail's quality of service results, published last month, indicated that it had not met its universal service obligation targets for the delivery of both first and second-class mail in the third quarter of the financial year. Royal Mail reported that that was due to high levels of covid-related isolation and to absences being at double the normal pre-pandemic levels at the peak of the omicron variant. That is something that we have heard from any number of sectors, and any number of businesses, beyond postal services. Royal Mail has also reported that hiring temporary staff to help to manage service issues proved very challenging because of the combination of very high competition for temporary staff and high infection rates across the population. Despite those challenges, postmen and women worked exceptionally hard to ensure that the delivery of covid-19 test kits was prioritised. Royal Mail responded to the Government's call to double the volume of covid test deliveries within days, and Royal Mail next-day delivery for kits exceeded 98%.

Royal Mail accepts and acknowledges that its quality of service has not always been as it would have wished, and has publicly apologised for any resulting delays that customers may have experienced in their local areas. It has reassured me that it continues to work to improve service levels, having spent more than £340 million in the last financial year on overtime, additional temporary staff and sick pay, as well as providing targeted support for the offices most impacted by staff absences. Royal Mail also publishes a daily list of the delivery offices most impacted by service delays. I understand that near the start of the year 77 local delivery offices were listed on the website, and that number had been reduced to one as of last week, indicating the progress that has been made.

I would like to take some time to say something about local service disruptions, particularly in regard to the constituency of the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood. I know from correspondence with her that this is, unfortunately, not a new issue and that she has been in contact with Royal Mail about service issues in the area.

Royal Mail has informed me that the service was disrupted because sickness absence levels in some parts of its operation remained higher than normal—East Dulwich delivery office in particular has been experiencing high levels of sickness. Royal Mail has taken measures to tackle the issue, including rotating mail deliveries to addresses so that customers receive mail as frequently as possible.

The hon. Member said she had recently visited the East Dulwich, Herne Hill and West Norwood delivery offices to see the measures first hand. I encourage others to do the same—to go into sorting offices and meet the management, as well as saying thank you to the workers. It is good to see what managers are doing. Hon. Members have mentioned changes of route, which tend to be put together by managers in the sorting office, close to those who walk the beat.

I understand that mail deliveries for the delivery offices that the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood visited have been taking place six days a week, barring occasional unforeseen disruptions, such as Storm Eunice and a spike in absences since February.

I am also aware that Royal Mail has introduced operational changes to its network as part of its wider transformational plans. Modernising Royal Mail operations is necessary to maintain sustainable universal postal services and deliver better outcomes for customers.

Navendu Mishra: I thank the Minister for giving way—I have always found him to be polite and helpful in my engagements with him. On the point about customer service and universal connectivity, can I press him on the issue of Crown post offices? The UK seems to be one of the only nations in the world where counter services are dis-integrated from delivery services—it does not even happen in the USA. I am one of the lucky MPs in Greater Manchester to have a Crown post office branch in their constituency. Can the Minister give me some assurance that the Government will not continue to close such branches or downgrade them to retail outlets?

Paul Scully: I cannot give the hon. Member that assurance, because he is referring to Post Office Ltd, which was disentangled from Royal Mail at the time of sale. Post Office Ltd oversees franchised post offices and owns and runs Crown post offices, and it is going through its own modernisation programme. The financial situation of the Post Office has been well rehearsed, including the backdrop of the Horizon situation. Allowing Royal Mail to work through its own modernisation programme disentangled from that scenario is not necessarily a bad thing.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood was elected at the same time as me; in those seven years, I have seen a huge difference when I go to the sorting offices each Christmas in the balance between letters and parcels. Royal Mail has had to change all the racks and systems to adapt to the big drift to more and more parcels being delivered and fewer and fewer letters.

Navendu Mishra: I accept the point about the change in letter and parcel volumes. My broader point, as we are here talking about Royal Mail, is that Crown post office branches offer services that other post offices do not. It is about not just letters, but banking services, insurance and so on. Every MP in this room will have people in their constituency who do not have access to broadband or a telephone and who depend on those branches. I will perhaps write to the Minister and he can come back to me on my local Crown branch.

Paul Scully: I do not want to be tempted into debating Crown post offices in this debate, but I would be happy to exchange correspondence with the hon. Member. He raises some important issues about access to cash and banking services. The future of the Post Office is very close to my heart. I want to make sure that we provide something that meets customer demand and is acceptable in this place, and that retains the social value we put on post offices while getting the fine balance right in terms of providing a solid financial footing—we should get that and more in a post office for the future. I will gladly engage with the hon. Member on that issue after the debate.

I am aware, as I said, that Royal Mail has introduced changes to its network. Modernising Royal Mail operations is necessary to maintaining that sustainable universal postal service and delivering those better outcomes for customers. However, in the immediate term, that may

[Paul Scully]

have contributed to local service issues while the business adapts to changes. It is always difficult to embrace and work through change, but Royal Mail has assured Government that if for any reason an address does not receive a mail delivery one day it will be a priority the next working day.

Royal Mail is open to engaging with the public, and indeed with all MPs about delivery services in their respective constituencies and across the UK. I urge any hon. Members whose constituents are not happy with the service they receive to take that up with Royal Mail. I have always found it engaging, but I am also here to help expedite things, if that does not work.

Ofcom is aware of continuing reports of delivery delays, and it issued a statement on 19 January expressing its concerns and making it clear to Royal Mail that it must take steps to improve its performance as the worst effects of the pandemic subside. As the regulator, it is ultimately for Ofcom to determine whether Royal Mail is meeting its statutory obligations. Ofcom has the powers to investigate and take enforcement action if Royal Mail fails to achieve its performance targets, without good justification, at the end of each financial year. That includes penalising Royal Mail for failing to meet its targets, as Ofcom did when it imposed a fine of £1.5 million on the business for missing its first-class delivery target for 2018-19.

Ofcom reviewed Royal Mail's performance against its quality of service targets in 2020-21 and in the light of the impacts of covid-19 throughout that year decided not to open an investigation. However, Ofcom continues to scrutinise performance closely. It is currently preparing to review Royal Mail's performance for the 2021-22 financial year and, if appropriate, it will not hesitate to act where necessary.

I would add that Ofcom must ensure that postal regulation keeps pace with the changes in the market and remains relevant, fit for purpose and effective. It last reviewed the regulatory framework for post in 2017 and said at the time that it should remain in place until 2022. It is now carrying out a further review of the future regulatory framework, which it aims to complete later this year. As part of that review, Ofcom ran a consultation on its proposals, from 9 December 2021 to 3 March 2022. It is currently considering the responses and expects to issue a statement in the summer.

A couple of quick questions were asked. The Government do not have any plans to renationalise Royal Mail. The sale of Royal Mail shares in 2013 and 2015 added £3.3 billion to public funds. In addition, we heard a lot about dividends, but not about the £2 billion that has been invested in the firm since privatisation, with a further £1.8 billion announced in 2019 for the following five years. Access to private capital, as with any other large, successful business, has enabled the investment necessary to innovate and seize the opportunities presented by new markets.

As I said, I want to ensure that I can help any hon. Member, should they have problems with their deliveries in the short term. I have found Royal Mail to be particularly proactive in engaging with hon. Members, should there be longer-term issues, and it does come back in good time. However, should it not, I am here to help expedite things, as I said.

There have been exceptional challenges in the last two years, and services have been disrupted. However, the postal system has continued to operate, and Royal Mail is now able to resume normal service levels as absence levels move closer to normal and as the business adjusts to operational changes. I want to take this opportunity to once again thank Royal Mail, and all postal workers, for the dedication and commitment shown while providing continued service throughout the pandemic.

5.23 pm

Helen Hayes: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. Two themes have run consistently through many of the contributions. The first is gratitude and appreciation for frontline postal delivery workers and acknowledgment of all that they have done during the pandemic, and I reiterate that once again. We are grateful to our postal workers up and down the country for the vital work they do.

The second theme is the frequent mismatch between the messages we all receive from Royal Mail as constituency MPs and the experiences of our constituents. I recognised, almost verbatim, the experience reported by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) of being told by Royal Mail that deliveries were being alternated every other day in her constituency, and yet residents were reporting that they were not receiving post for weeks at a time. That has absolutely been my experience. The problem is not the timeliness of the response from Royal Mail; it is that it simply does not chime with the experiences of our constituents. They have no reason to exaggerate or make up their experiences of the postal delivery services. If post is arriving, there is not a problem. Yet, time and again people report that there is a problem. I am grateful to the Minister for his continued engagement on this issue, and I am sure that, like Royal Mail managers in my constituency, he is sick of hearing from me about it, but we will not rest, because Royal Mail's services are so important.

I am disappointed that the Minister did not address the data reporting issue, which is critical. Royal Mail cannot be held accountable for local delivery office failures, which matter so much in specific communities, if it has to report its performance data only at a very broad level. The same is true of national satisfaction survey reporting: hearing that 80% of customers are happy is no comfort if someone lives in SE22 when the SE22 delivery office is failing.

I urge the Minister to step back from the briefings he receives from Royal Mail and Ofcom, to look at what people across the country are saying about the quality of the services they receive and to think about the role Government can play in getting a grip on what I believe is a failing organisation and in making sure that Royal Mail continues to deliver the post, but does so with a reliability that such a vital service demands across the country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Royal Mail services and the covid-19 pandemic.

5.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Public Inquiry

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

6 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): I will call Marsha De Cordova to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the covid-19 public inquiry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I begin by saying a huge thank you to many organisations, including Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, Disability Rights UK, Sense and the Royal National Institute of Blind People, for all their tireless hard work in this area supporting the many people who have been impacted by the pandemic.

Covid-19 is the worst public health emergency and global health pandemic we have faced in a lifetime, having devastating effects globally. Here in the UK we were not exempt, with over 150,000 lives lost, which was one of the worst death rates. Having significant and unequal human and economic effects, the pandemic disproportionately impacted women, including pregnant women, as well as children, disabled people, and black, Asian and ethnic minority communities. Moreover, people's class or where they live has an impact, exposing and exacerbating the inequalities as well as creating many new ones.

The pandemic severely tested this Government's preparedness, resilience and co-ordination, but there is no doubt in anyone's mind that the Government were not prepared for the pandemic and they lacked any credible strategy or plan to mitigate the situation. How they responded to the unprecedented challenges they faced raised a wealth of questions. The Government resisted mounting calls and pressure for a public inquiry until May last year. There needs to be a comprehensive investigation into all aspects of the pandemic and into the Government's response to establish the facts, rebuild trust with the British people, hold power to account and learn lessons to ensure that the mistakes made will never happen again. The Government said that the inquiry would start in spring this year—here we are—but they have recently confirmed that public hearings will not begin until 2023. That is not good enough and is a huge blow to everyone, including the bereaved families who need justice and answers.

We know that there will now be two inquiries: one by the UK Government and one by the Scottish Government. Both inquiries will look at a wide range of issues, including the use of public health powers and expertise, such as medical evidence, restrictions and the wearing of masks, and health and social care policy, such as PPE availability, care homes, Test and Trace, and the vaccination roll-out. They will also look at the financial impacts, including statutory sick pay—or the lack of adequate statutory sick pay—public sector procurement safeguards, furlough and business support.

While the inquiry seeks to cover a wider range of areas, I strongly believe that the failure to include specific reference to disabled people is a grave omission. When I asked the Minister in February whether the

inquiry would have a specific focus on disability, she replied, "Yes". However, without explicit inclusion in the inquiry's terms of reference, how can disabled people have confidence in the inquiry and confidence that lessons can and will be learned? So, today I will focus my speech on the impact of the pandemic on disabled people.

Between January and November 2020, of the 50,888 covid-related deaths in the UK, 30,296 were of disabled people or of someone with an underlying health condition, which accounts for six in 10 covid-related deaths. And that is not just any old data; it is data from the Office for National Statistics. During that same period in 2020, the risk of death involving covid was 3.1 times higher for disabled men than for non-disabled men, and the risk for disabled women was 3.5 times higher than for non-disabled women.

That deeply concerning disparity must be examined and must form part of an inquiry, as I believe it is the one thing that we really need to learn the lessons of, and why. Disabled people were one of the groups who were disproportionately impacted the most by the pandemic, and that remains the case now. Disabled people and their families have suffered the worst form of hardship and loss, and they really were an afterthought, including on—but not limited to—issues related to the labour market and employment, the move from working at home to hybrid working and so on, and the risks associated with face-to-face working, particularly for people living with sight loss. There are also the issues around education and learning, and for young people and children education and learning were incredibly challenging, but there were also issues when it came to accessing goods and services within the covid regulations. I have heard of so many instances at the start of the pandemic when many people who are blind or partially sighted could not even access food deliveries.

That is why, early on in the pandemic, I set out 10 clear asks of the Government, in order to alleviate some of the pandemic's worst effects. However, in the words of one woman who has multiple disabilities:

"Thousands, if not millions, of disabled people lost their support network, which set back progress and caused so many other issues. Whether that is health or social care, we are human beings and deserve to have as much support as anyone else."

She could not be more right.

Also highlighted in the report by Sense last year, which was entitled, "Locked Down and Abandoned: Disabled People's Experiences of Covid-19", were the necessities of daily life that were involved, whether that was in education, employment, social contact, exercise, accessing food and essential supplies, medical and social care, financial support, testing kits and PPE. We know that three in four disabled people believed that their needs were overlooked, and that they have not received enough support.

That is why I believe that disabled people must be at the heart of this inquiry—yes, to learn the lessons and to be prepared for the future, but also to tackle some of the deep-rooted inequalities once and for all, and to ensure that the needs of disabled people are properly understood and prioritised.

Why is that important? First, we know that disabled people were unable to access essential support, including essential financial support, and services in the community. The introduction of the Care Act easements under the

[Marsha De Cordova]

Coronavirus Act 2020 contributed to a cut or reduction of essential social care support, at a time when support should have been enhanced.

The social care system was not fit for purpose prior to the pandemic—I think we would all agree with that—and required significant investment and reform. However, despite the expiration of the easements, social care support has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. One of the worst practices was the blanket use of “do not attempt resuscitation” orders. Many families believed that they were being applied without their informed consent, and no system was in place to prevent people from not receiving lifesaving care just based on their underlying health condition. It prompts the question: why did the Government not do enough to identify the groups that were at greater risk during this pandemic?

When it comes to financial support, nearly 2 million ill and disabled people were excluded from the £20 uplift that was applied to universal credit, leaving many having to make difficult choices. The financial impact is only being worsened by the cost of living crisis. Those in receipt of social security benefits have faced a real-terms cut in support, which will push them further into poverty and hardship.

Secondly, the failure to include disabled people in policy and decision making meant that decisions were made that led to devastating consequences. For instance, not identifying vulnerable groups resulted in many being unable to access support. If a person was not classed as clinically extremely vulnerable, their support was restricted. The rigid list that was compiled meant that the vast majority of disabled people were left without support, including those with motor neurone disease, and blind and partially sighted people.

Thirdly, inclusion and accessibility were neither considered nor adhered to. Something as basic as producing inclusive information in accessible formats did not happen. That should have been the bare minimum. Throughout the pandemic, communicating key messages, information and guidance with the British people was vital, yet the daily press briefings that we all tuned into did not have any British Sign Language interpretation for deaf and hard-of-hearing people. Imagine if, during those discussions and meetings when decisions were being taken, there was input from disabled people or the organisations that work with them and represent them: just maybe, things could have been different quite early on.

Many testing sites were inaccessible. Home testing kits were, and frankly still are, inaccessible. There was a requirement to read barcodes, and instructions were not available in alternative formats. I know from my own lived personal experience the difficulties of having to use those testing kits. Goodness knows, I could not redo those boxes and send them back—it was impossible.

Finally, mental health and emotional wellbeing were tested to the limit for many disabled people. Prior to the pandemic, disabled people were already experiencing greater levels of loneliness and isolation, and the pandemic only exacerbated that. Two in three disabled people said that their mental health worsened during the pandemic.

Overall, I believe that the treatment of disabled people was well under par. That is why I consistently called for the Government to carry out and publish quality impact

assessments, but my pleas went largely unheard. The one time they did publish an impact assessment, it was four months after the enactment of the Coronavirus Act. The inquiry must investigate the lack of impact assessments produced and gain a fuller understanding of what data and evidence was used when introducing policies. Government actions and decisions could have prevented the many devastating consequences that disabled people faced. The inquiry will consider any disparities evident in the impact of coronavirus, including those related to protected characteristics as set out under the Equality Act 2010, but it must also look at how protected groups intersect and the greater and wider impacts, and consider why there was not sufficient thought and planning for those groups.

The inquiry should take a human rights-led approach, such as that set out in the terms of reference for the covid public inquiry in Scotland. The omission of reference to the Human Rights Act 1998 in the UK inquiry has not gone unnoticed. I urge that it is added following the consultation process. I hope the Minister can say in her response why the UK Government took the decision not to include that Act. Does she agree that the only remedy would be to ensure that the inquiry gives due consideration to it?

As with all public inquiries, this one must be fully accessible to the public. Documents have still not been published in accessible formats, including easy read, which is not right. The website should have other formats—not just PDFs, but HTML and Word. It should not be on the user to contact the inquiry to ask, “Please can you send me an accessible version”. Such versions should be available alongside all the other documents. Again, this goes back to basics. To build trust and confidence in the inquiry, the terms of reference should state that an accessible communications policy will be implemented. That would go a long way.

I would really like the Minister to say that all parts of the covid inquiry, including hearings, will be accessible and inclusive, including all audio and visual forms of the inquiry, and for her to confirm that British Sign Language interpretation will be available. Millions of deaf and disabled people would benefit, but it would also show that the inquiry seeks to be accessible.

Will the Minister tell us why there is yet another delay? As I have highlighted, there has been mounting pressure and increasing calls for an inquiry. For public hearings to only begin in 2023—another year for people to wait—is frankly not good enough. We have a chair, but the inquiry has not formally started, and a letter from the Prime Minister is required for it to do so. That must happen now, so that no more time is wasted before we learn the lessons from the mistakes that were made.

When the terms of reference are ready and published, I hope that there will be specific reference to disabled people. I think I have given a pretty decent overview of the impact on disabled people: they have been impacted the worst and the most, and due and proper consideration should be given to them. I ask the Minister to encourage the Prime Minister to establish a panel, made up of experts with experience, to support the chair of the inquiry. She will not be surprised to hear me say that that panel should include disabled people and those who were affected by the pandemic.

Finally, will the Minister give assurances that, when preparing for future pandemics—I am sure the Government will do, are doing or have done that, but I would like her

to confirm it—disabled people will not be hammered, disadvantaged and dehumanised, as they have been? I need her to give assurances today that that will never happen again.

6.20 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I welcome this debate, which is on a subject of vital importance: ensuring that the public inquiry into covid-19 is set up in the most effective way possible, so that we may learn lessons from the terrible pandemic. I congratulate the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on securing it. I will try to respond to her specific points, but let me begin by setting out the current position on the inquiry and the next steps.

The current status was given on 10 March, when the Prime Minister published the draft terms of reference for the public inquiry into covid-19. The inquiry will take place under the Inquiries Act 2005 and will have full formal powers. It will be chaired by the right hon. Baroness Heather Hallett, the former Lady Justice of Appeal, who was also the coroner at the inquest into the 7/7 bombings. As it is vital that we get the inquiry's terms of reference right—the hon. Lady has asked me many questions on this point—the Prime Minister has asked Baroness Hallett to lead a period of public engagement and consultation before making recommendations to him on any refinements. I will say a little more about that process in a few moments, but first I will describe the inquiry's remit as it is currently drafted.

The draft terms of reference give the inquiry two aims: to find the facts and to learn lessons for the future. Both are crucial to help us all to understand what happened and what we should learn from the experience. In order to fulfil those aims, the inquiry—quite rightly—will have a very broad scope. The draft terms of reference cover preparedness, the response in the health and care sector, and our economic response. It looks at decision making and its implications at a central, local and devolved level. That all aims to ensure that every part of the UK can learn the lessons needed from this experience to prepare for future pandemics.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am grateful to the Government for establishing the inquiry to learn lessons from this awful pandemic. The Minister deserves great credit for her leadership of that process. Will she add to those terms of reference the death care sector? She will know that funeral directors, morticians, gravediggers—all those involved at the place of burial or cremation—right through to bereavement counsellors faced extraordinary challenges during this time. Access to PPE, the organisation of funerals and vaccination as a priority are all things that I hope the Minister will look at as part of the process, so that if we ever face something similar—heaven help us if we should—we will get it right.

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my right hon. Friend for asking those questions. In just a minute I will come to an answer for him.

Importantly, the terms of reference require the inquiry to listen to the experiences of those most affected by the pandemic, including bereaved families, and to investigate any disparities evident in the impact of the pandemic

and our responses. This point is crucial, because the draft terms of reference are explicit that the inquiry must look at the protected characteristics in particular, as the hon. Member for Battersea asked me more than once. I confirm that those are age, disability, race, sex, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, gender reassignment, and religion and beliefs. Each of those important issues is already in the scope of the inquiry's terms of reference.

As I have said, it is vital that we get the terms of reference right, which is precisely why the Prime Minister asked Baroness Hallett to consult on the draft. That consultation opened on 10 March and closed on 7 April. Over the course of four weeks, Baroness Hallett and her team travelled to 11 cities across the UK and spoke to more than 150 bereaved families. They also heard from sector representatives, including those representing children, people with disabilities, and frontline and key workers including funeral directors—I will ensure the list has been extended to other frontline workers—about a range of equality issues.

People have shared their views online as to what the inquiry should investigate, what it should look at first and whether it should set an end date for its hearings. Those responding have offered their suggestions on how people who have been severely impacted by the pandemic, or who have lost loved ones, can be given a voice and be part of the inquiry. By the time the inquiry's consultation concluded, over 20,000 individuals and organisations had responded. That is an incredible level of response, which demonstrates the depth of feeling held on this matter and the importance of getting this work right. I have no doubt that the views expressed here today on refinements to the terms of reference will also have been made through that process.

As regards Scotland, any inquiry set up by the devolved Administrations may only consider devolved matters. This inquiry will ensure that the whole of the UK can learn the right lessons for the future, and in doing so it will seek to avoid duplication with any inquiry set up on a devolved basis.

The inquiry is now collating and analysing all the responses it received. Baroness Hallett has said that she will make recommendations to the Prime Minister on the final terms of reference in May. In the interests of transparency, Baroness Hallett has committed to publishing a summary of the consultation responses received and the many meetings she has held.

Once the Prime Minister has received Baroness Hallett's recommendations, he will consider them carefully before finalising the terms of reference and making a further statement. As regards the date when the public hearings will start, the important thing is that the inquiry will begin its formal work this spring, once the terms of reference are finalised. As the Prime Minister has always said, from that point the process, procedure and timing of the inquiry stages will be for the independent chair to determine, and it is right that we respect that.

Marsha De Cordova rose—

Mrs Wheeler: I will finish by saying that Baroness Hallett has set out that her investigations will begin once the terms of reference are finalised. She has said that she intends to gather evidence throughout the year, with public hearings beginning in 2023. The actual

[Mrs Wheeler]

inquiry will start before that, but the hearings will begin in 2023. Baroness Hallett has made it clear that she will do everything in her power to deliver the recommendations as soon as possible.

Marsha De Cordova *rose—*

Mrs Wheeler: I have only a couple of minutes left. This has been a valuable debate. I hope I have been able to offer reassurance regarding the inquiry's draft scope, which is very wide and covers the details that the hon. Member for Battersea asked for, and about the breadth

and extent of the consultation process that will no doubt lead to further refinements from other frontline workers.

I extend my thanks to every individual and organisation who took the time to engage with the consultation process, whether online or in person. Their views will be crucial in getting the inquiry's terms of reference right, in how it is run, and, in due course, in shaping our understanding of how the pandemic has impacted families and communities across the UK, and ensuring that the right lessons are learned.

Question put and agreed to.

6.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 19 April 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

UK Green Infrastructure Platform

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): I can today inform the House that UK Green Infrastructure Platform Ltd (UKGIP) is being wound up, via a members' voluntary liquidation, having fulfilled its objectives to own and manage the five assets retained following the sale of the UK Green Investment Bank and to enhance and realise value through their sale.

UKGIP, a private limited company, was established in 2017 to manage the Government's interests in the unsold assets from the Green Investment Bank. It was 90% owned by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. UK Green Investment Bank Ltd (UKGIB), which is wholly owned by Macquarie, held the remaining 10% shareholding in UKGIP.

[HCWS768]

DEFENCE

Call-out Order: Illegal Entry into the UK

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey): A new order has been made under section 56(1B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to enable Reservists to be called into permanent service to prepare for, participate in, or support operations by Her Majesty's forces to counter illegal entries into the United Kingdom.

The Ministry of Defence is regularly tasked to support broader HMG objectives. As part of this support, reserve forces will be on standby, as part of a whole force approach with regular forces, to deliver a range of Defence outputs such as—but not limited to—the reinforcement of regular units, provision of specialist knowledge, skills and experience, and support to partners across Government.

The order shall take effect from the day on which it is made and shall cease to have effect 12 months from the date on which it is made.

[HCWS773]

Small Boats Migration

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey): The Prime Minister announced on 14 April 2022 that the Ministry of Defence has commenced primacy for this Government's operational response to small boat migration in the English channel. This follows months of close collaboration between Departments and partners to establish operational plans and detailed working arrangements. The details for Operation ISOTROPE—including responsibilities, governance and financial arrangements—have been agreed with the Home Office and will operate until 31 January 2023. This surge in Defence support will assist the Border Force in optimising existing processes, assets and expertise to bring small

boat numbers under manageable levels, enabling continued public confidence in this Government's response during a particularly challenging period.

Operation ISOTROPE will respond to the circumstances of attempted migrant flows in the months ahead. Initially, the Government have provided Defence with an additional £50 million of funding which will be used to enhance a number of surface and surveillance capabilities and optimise existing process and infrastructure. This will enable the MOD to monitor and manage migrants attempting this perilous journey and, alongside the Border Force, ensure that those arriving on UK shores do so safely and can then be passed promptly into the Home Office immigration system for appropriate processing. Overall responsibility for managing borders and immigration is not impacted by this announcement and remains with the Home Office.

[HCWS771]

EDUCATION

Further Education Capital Transformation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Alex Burghart): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Education (Baroness Barran) made the following written statement on 4 April 2022.

I am pleased to announce the outcome of the bidding round for the further education capital transformation programme (FECTP). The bidding was open to all FE colleges and designated institutions, and 62 FE colleges across England have been successful.

The successful colleges have been offered grants, for 78 projects to upgrade buildings and transform campuses, helping to level up opportunities for more people. The total value of the funding from this round is up to £405 million, and colleges will also make a match funding contribution to their projects.

The FE capital transformation programme delivers the Government's £1.5 billion commitment to upgrade the estate of FE colleges and designated institutions in England, promoting parity of esteem between FE and other routes. Improving the condition of FE colleges is important in ensuring students have the opportunity to develop skills in high-quality buildings and facilities, and in addressing skills gaps in local economies.

In September 2020, £200 million was allocated to FE colleges and designated institutions to undertake urgent remedial condition improvement works and to provide a boost to the economy and the education system.

In April 2021, we announced our plans to work in partnership with 16 colleges to upgrade some of the worst condition sites in England. We have worked with these colleges to develop their plans further and to manage procurement of their projects, with construction work now beginning.

This investment should be seen in the wider context of our reforms to further education, as set out in the White Paper "Skills for Jobs Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth" <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth> and our plans to spread opportunity more equally across the UK, as set out in the Levelling Up White Paper <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>.

The successful colleges are listed online via this link: www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-capital-transformation-fund-stage-2-successful-applicants

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-04-19/HCWS769/>

[HCWS769]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Canada Trade Negotiations

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The first round of UK-Canada free trade agreement negotiations began on 28 March and concluded on 1 April. A delegation of 27 Canadian officials undertook technical talks in London with a further 133 joining the talks virtually.

During this first round, talks focused on reviewing the current trade agreement, sharing recent policy developments in the UK and Canada, and building a shared understanding of each other's overall positions in every area expected to be covered in the new free trade agreement. Technical discussions were held across 34 policy areas over 50 separate sessions.

Both countries share a strong desire to secure an ambitious, modern and comprehensive deal that goes further than the existing trade continuity agreement, removing existing trade barriers and creating new opportunities for business in the UK and Canada. The negotiations are a key opportunity to deepen UK-Canada trade, already worth £20 billion, and to work with a like-minded partner on a range of inclusive and future facing trade policy such as supporting women's economic empowerment, SMEs, innovation, climate and environment.

The second round of official level negotiations is due to take place in June 2022.

We remain clear that any deal the Government strike must be in the best interests of the British people and the economy.

The Government will keep Parliament updated as these negotiations progress.

[HCWS770]

TRANSPORT

Local Transport Funding

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Baroness Vere of Norbiton) made the following ministerial statement on 4 April.

Today I can update the House on three major transport investments we are making across England over the coming months, marking a significant milestone in our mission to deliver cheaper and better transport services across the country.

In our national bus strategy "Bus Back Better" published last year, we set out our plan to delivery better and cheaper bus services for passengers. The strategy acknowledged that while there are pockets of good bus performance outside London, far too many places still do not get the same service levels seen in the capital.

Today's announcements, along with the funding of zero emission buses, and the bus elements of the increased city region sustainable transport settlements, form part of the £3 billion for bus transformation announced in 2020. £2 billion has also been paid to bus operators to support services during the pandemic.

We have now chosen a total of 31 counties, city regions and unitary authorities to receive this funding to level up their local bus services.

Our investment will reduce fares, support the cost of living, and create new jobs for people by enhancing bus services and lowering the cost of travel. It will make a

significant contribution to our levelling-up mission to bring local public transport connectivity across the country significantly closer to the standards of London.

Including earlier awards, this new funding means that just under two-thirds of England's population outside London will be benefiting from new investment in their bus services.

The successful areas have been chosen because of their ambition to repeat the success achieved in London—which drove up bus usage and made the bus a natural choice for everyone, not just those without cars. As the Government stated in "Bus Back Better" areas not showing sufficient ambition, including for improvements to bus priority, would not be funded.

We will be writing to all local transport authorities to advise them of the outcome of their proposals and will be offering practical support to those authorities that are not receiving funding on this occasion, as there is still a lot that can be done to level up local bus services and grow bus usage.

As confirmed at the 2021 spending review and Budget, we are investing a total of £5.7 billion to improve local rail networks, tram services, and buses in city regions across England.

The city region sustainable transport settlements are multi-year capital funding settlements to improve the local transport networks of eight city regions across England through five-year settlements from 2022-23. This combines new and existing funds, including highways maintenance, integrated transport block and final year transforming cities fund.

Following the assessment of their business cases, the Government have now confirmed their final settlements. Further work to finalise the full range of schemes to be delivered through these settlements will now take place over the coming months.

This unprecedented investment provides areas with long-term funding certainty to design and deliver transformational programmes.

The money will help deliver, among other things, a new mass transit network in West Yorkshire, major improvements to rail services in the Tees Valley, next generation Metrolink tram-train vehicles in Greater Manchester, the renewal of Supertram in South Yorkshire and bus rapid transit corridors in the West Midlands. Letters have been sent to the metro Mayors outlining the funding.

City regions benefiting from confirmation of the multibillion-pound transport investment are Greater Manchester (£1.07 billion), West Yorkshire (£830 million), South Yorkshire (£570 million), West Midlands (£1.05 billion), Tees Valley (£310 million), West of England (£540 million) and Liverpool City Region (£710 million). The North East will be eligible to access its share of the funding once appropriate governance is in place but will continue to receive funding in 2022-23 for highways maintenance, integrated transport block and final year of transforming cities fund.

Finally, as I previously updated the House on 1 March, the Government can now announce that light rail services in the midlands and north will receive over £37 million to support their continued operation and provide local areas time to adapt their systems to new post-pandemic travel patterns. This funding will support the Nottingham, Tyne and Wear, Manchester, Sheffield and West Midlands tram and light rail systems, and this brings the total amount provided to the bus and light rail sector over the next six months to £183.9 million.

[HCWS767]

Portishead Branch Line: MetroWest Phase 1 Development Consent Order Application

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): I have been asked by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State (Grant Shapps) to make this written ministerial statement. This statement concerns the application made by North Somerset District Council

under the Planning Act 2008 for the construction of a new railway on the track-bed on the former branch line from Bristol to Portishead.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make his decision within three months of receipt of the Examining Authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) to extend the deadline and make a statement to the House of Parliament announcing the new deadline.

The Secretary of State received the Examining Authority's report on the Portishead branch line-MetroWest phase 1 development consent order application on 19 July 2021 and, following an earlier extension of four months to allow further consideration of environmental matters, the current deadline for a decision is 19 April 2022.

The deadline for the decision is now to be extended to 19 February 2023—an extension of seven months—to allow North Somerset District Council further time to demonstrate that funding for the entire scheme has been secured.

The decision to set the new deadline is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent for the above application.

[HCWS772]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

UK Shared Prosperity Fund

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): Last week, my Department announced the launch of the £2.6 billion UK Shared Prosperity Fund, publishing a prospectus that sets out the fund's objectives, priorities and local allocations, as well as how the fund will be delivered. This starts the process of places across the country developing local plans to deliver the fund.

It represents the culmination of concerted effort and joint working across Government, with the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and local partners across the UK. It is a key component on our journey to transform the country, set out in the Levelling Up White Paper, and our central mission to level up and spread opportunity and prosperity to all of our communities.

We are investing in domestic priorities and targeting funding where it is needed most: building pride in place; supporting high quality skills training; supporting pay, employment and productivity growth; and increasing life chances.

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund is a marked shift from the EU structural funds it succeeds. Under the EU, organisations had to go through a lengthy application process. Indeed, the process between first application and approval could easily exceed 12 months. The UK employed hundreds of civil servants to facilitate this, with projects only getting paid in arrears. The EU had strict, rigid requirements on what money could and could not be spent on, but our approach is much more flexible, empowering local people who know best.

In contrast, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund provides a three-year allocation to local authorities, with the goal of approving investment plans within three months.

The fund will be much more flexible and locally led, freeing communities from the bureaucratic, rigid and complex processes of the EU structural funds. Bureaucracy will be slashed, and there will be far more discretion over what money is spent on. EU requirements for match funding, which impacted poorer places, will be abolished.

Instead of regional agencies, funding decisions will be made by elected leaders in local government, with input from local Members of Parliament and local businesses and voluntary groups. The fund will lead to visible, tangible improvements to the places where people work and live, alongside real investment in people's skills, giving communities up and down the UK more reasons to be proud of their area.

All areas of the UK are receiving an allocation from the fund, with even the smallest places receiving at least £1 million, recognising that even the most affluent parts of the UK contain pockets of deprivation and need support. Funding will also match in real terms what was previously spent through the European Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and each Local Enterprise Partnership area of England, meeting the UK Government's commitment to match EU funding. We are ramping up UK Shared Prosperity Fund funding as EU funds tail off, and when that funding ends, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund will match the annual average spending of EU funds, reaching around £1.5 billion per year, which is more generous than the average EU funding budget, which is around £1.3 billion average per year.

As funding is confirmed for three financial years—2022-23, 2023-24 and 2024-25—this will facilitate places' planning and allow the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to act as a predictable baseline element of local growth funding. It comes alongside other funding to level up the UK, including the £4.8 billion Levelling Up Fund and £150 million Community Ownership Fund, and builds on the £200 million for UK Community Renewal Fund projects that we announced last year.

A key part of the fund is Multiply, the adult numeracy programme. With up to £559 million in funding available, this programme will offer local and national support for people to improve their numeracy skills—equipping adults across the UK with the skills they need to progress in life. It is being led by the Department for Education in England and funding will be distributed to the Greater London Authority, all Mayoral Combined Authorities, and upper tier/unitary authorities outside of these areas in England. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, Multiply will be delivered alongside wider programmes of UK Shared Prosperity Fund activity.

Further information about the fund and the investment planning process, as well as local allocations, is included in the UK Shared Prosperity Fund Prospectus and the Multiply Prospectus, both of which have now been published.

The next step is for each place to work with the private sector, civil society and others, as well as the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, to develop a local investment plan. This should set out how they will target their funding on local priorities, against measurable goals. Once this is in place and agreed with the UK Government, they can unlock three years of investment.

This new fund is a clear manifestation of our commitment to level up all of the UK. Alongside historic levels of investment confirmed through Spending Review '21, it will make a significant contribution to

overcoming geographic disparities, spreading opportunity and boosting employment, wages and life chances right across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

[HCWS774]

Petitions

Tuesday 19 April 2022

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Acorn Project

The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that the UK Government's decision not to back the Acorn project in Scotland was incredibly disappointing; further that a significant energy sector expertise exists in Scotland and that this decision will damage not only the energy sector in the North East, but also the downstream sector across the country, including Grangemouth; and further that this decision will have a serious detriment on Scotland meeting its 2045 net zero target.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to acknowledge the blow this decision will have on the energy sector in the North East and beyond, including its impact on climate change, and reverse its decision to give the Acorn project reserve bidder status, and thereby honour its commitment to support a just transition to a low carbon economy in Scotland.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, *Official Report*, 1 February 2022; Vol. 708, c. 256.]

[P002711]

Observations from the Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands):

In November 2021, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy announced that the HyNet and East Coast clusters have been confirmed as Track-1 clusters for the mid-2020s and will be taken forward into Track-1 negotiations. If the clusters represent value for money for the consumer and the taxpayer, then subject to final decisions of Ministers, they will receive support under the Government's CCUS programme.

We also announced the Acorn project as a reserve cluster. A reserve cluster is one which met the eligibility criteria and performed to a good standard against the evaluation criteria. As such, we have continued to advise the Acorn project throughout phase 2 of the sequencing process, to help it continue its development and planning. This means that if Government choose to discontinue engagement with a cluster in Track-1, we can engage with this reserve cluster instead.

This announcement followed a transparent and objective assessment period, consistent with the criteria and process laid out when we launched the process in May 2021. By adhering to the published assessment process, we are ensuring that key principles of objective assessment and transparency are upheld. I would emphasise that the criteria used in our assessment provide a faithful and accurate representation of the Government's strategic priorities for CCUS deployment specifically in the mid-2020s.

While I recognise the benefits of the Acorn project's proposal, and its importance to the UK's net zero transition, I remain confident in the robustness of our assessment, which found that both HyNet and the East Coast cluster performed better against the weighted criteria. I can also assure you that my officials have provided the cluster with feedback on their performance directly.

Given its status as reserve cluster, we have engaged with Acorn since the Track-1 announcement and will continue to do so throughout phase 2 of the sequencing process, to help it to continue its development and planning. The cluster has also been allocated over £40 million in development funding by the UK Government in recent years, and we are keen to ensure that the cluster is able to derive as much value as possible from this support. I have also met with representatives of Storegga, the T&S company, to explore next steps for the cluster, and my Department remains open to further contact where we can be of help.

We have also invited emitter projects seeking to connect to the Acorn project to participate in phase 2, with the aim of maintaining as credible a reserve option as possible, and we are grateful for the cluster's ongoing co-operation in this regard. On 22 March this year, BEIS announced the phase 2 projects that have met the eligibility criteria required to proceed to full assessment¹, including those intending to connect to the Acorn project.

This means that, if Government choose to discontinue engagement with either HyNet or the East Coast cluster in the event of delivery challenges arising, we can engage with this reserve cluster instead. Given the inherent delivery risks associated with these first-of-a-kind clusters, we place significant value on maintaining this credible reserve option, and the importance of this has been communicated to the cluster.

Looking beyond Track-1, the Government will seek to bring forward a process to facilitate the deployment of additional 'Track-2' clusters this decade, following our announcement in the net zero strategy that these clusters will enable an additional 10Mtpa of CO₂ capture capacity by 2030. While I am not able to provide any further assurances regarding the Acorn project's status in relation to Track-2, any cluster proposal which is mature and well-developed is likely to perform well in a future assessment process.

In the long-term Government remain committed to helping all industrial clusters to decarbonise as we work collectively to reach net zero emissions by 2050, and I am clear that CCUS will continue to play a key role in this process. I am also clear that, in transitioning to the net zero economy, we must ensure that the benefits of our action are distributed across all four nations of the UK; the net zero strategy includes measures which will benefit the people of Scotland across areas including heat and buildings, transport, heavy industry, and our net zero innovation portfolio.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cluster-sequencing-phase-2-eligible-projects-power-ccus-hydrogen-and-icc/cluster-sequencing-phase-2-eligible-projects-power-ccus-hydrogen-and-icc>.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Sodium valproate

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that many families have been greatly and negatively impacted by the use of sodium valproate in pregnancy which has impacted many children for the rest of their lives; and notes that the Cumberlege Review, written by Baroness Julia Cumberlege, found that the use of sodium valproate in pregnancy has been linked to an increased risk of developmental problems, spina bifida, hare lip, cleft palate, limb defects and other serious birth defects.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government immediately implement, in full, every recommendation in the Cumberlege Review.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Cat Smith, *Official Report*, 1 March 2022; Vol. 709, c. 1011.]

[P002715]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield):

The Government published their response to the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review (the “Review” (also known as “the Cumberlege Review”)) on 21 July 2021. The Government accepted the majority of the Review’s nine strategic recommendations and 50 actions for improvement.

The Government did not accept two of the Review’s recommendations:

recommendations 3 and 4, which called for the establishment of a redress agency and separate redress schemes for those who have been affected by pelvic mesh, sodium valproate

and hormone pregnancy tests. The reasons for this are set out in the Government response, which include focusing efforts to improve the future safety of medicines and medical devices. The Government have no plans to revisit this position.

The Government are committed to making rapid progress on all areas set out in their response. Work is well under way to implement the accepted recommendations, which includes legislating for the first Patient Safety Commissioner and setting up nine specialist mesh centres for those who have been adversely affected by implanted mesh. As set out in the Government response, the Government aim to publish an update on progress to implement the accepted recommendations in summer 2022.

The Government recognise the adverse impact that sodium valproate, when taken by mothers during pregnancy, has had on the lives of women and their families. The Government are taking forward a programme of work to ensure that sodium valproate is only prescribed when clinically appropriate. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) has implemented a strengthened regulatory position on sodium valproate, which includes ensuring that valproate is not prescribed to a woman or girl who is able to have children, unless she is fully aware of the risks and understands the need to avoid becoming pregnant.

Future safety of sodium valproate is managed by the Medicines in Pregnancy Valproate Registry (the Registry). The Registry currently includes all women in England who are receiving NHS-prescribed valproate and identifies when they are pregnant and accessing NHS care for that pregnancy. Work is ongoing to understand how to extend the Registry to all women in each of the Home Nations.

Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 19 April 2022

TREASURY

National Insurance Contributions (Increase of Thresholds) Bill

The following are extracts from the debates on the National Insurance Contributions (Increase of Thresholds) Bill on 24 March 2022.

Stephen Timms: The Minister mentioned Martin Lewis, and I wonder if she could provide the information that the Chief Secretary said she might be able to give in winding up this debate about the effect of this national insurance measure on people claiming universal credit. Martin Lewis has made the point that they will lose 55% of the £330 a year benefit. Will she confirm if that is correct?

Lucy Frazer: I was going to come back to that point, but I am very happy to deal with it now. The right hon. Gentleman is right that an individual may be affected by the taper, but they will be better off overall as a result of the change. If they are earning below the work allowance, they will get the full benefit. It is important to point out the changes we have already made for those on universal credit. As a result of those changes, 1.7 million households will benefit from the taper rate change, which is £1,000 of additional income for them. *[Official Report, 24 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 508.]*

Letter of correction from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury:

Errors have been identified in my response to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms).

The correct response should have been:

Lucy Frazer: I was going to come back to that point, but I am very happy to deal with it now. The right hon. Gentleman is right that an individual may be affected by the taper, but they will be better off overall as a result of the change. If they are earning below the work allowance,

they will **already benefit from the existing national insurance threshold**. It is important to point out the changes we have already made for those on universal credit. As a result of those changes, 1.7 million households will benefit from the taper rate change **and the increase to work allowances, which is on average around £1,000** of additional income for them.

Clive Efford: I am wondering whether the Minister missed new clause 2, because she did not address the problem. Yes, increases were introduced in the autumn Budget last year, but this year, people are getting less than they were anticipating due to the increase in the threshold of national insurance. People were being told yesterday that they should get an extra £330, but they will actually get less than half of that. What is the Government going to do about that? The Treasury is clawing back several hundred million pounds from some of the poorest workers in the country.

Lucy Frazer: I do not know whether the hon. Member was in the Chamber when the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) raised this point and I addressed it. He is right to point out that an individual may be affected by the taper, but overall they will be better off as a result of this change. If those people are earning below the work allowance, they will get the full benefit. I reiterate that the changes that we have already made mean that those who are on universal credit will benefit by £1,000 from the cut to the taper rate.

[Official Report, 24 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 524.]

Letter of correction from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury:

Errors have been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford).

The correct response should have been:

Lucy Frazer: If those people are earning below the work allowance, they will **already benefit from the existing national insurance threshold**. I reiterate that the changes that we have already made mean that those who are on universal credit will benefit by **around** £1,000 from the cut to the taper rate **and the increase to work allowances**.

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