

**Thursday
28 April 2022**

**Volume 712
No. 152**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 28 April 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

MONKEN HADLEY COMMON BILL

Lords amendments considered and agreed to.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

*The Secretary of State was asked—
River Wear: Pollution*

1. **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the level of pollution in the River Wear. [906639]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The Environment Agency routinely assesses pollution levels in the River Wear, and it is working with the Coal Authority and Northumbrian Water to reduce pollution. The EA will take the strongest enforcement action, where necessary, and improving water quality is a Government priority. Conservative Members voted in favour of a whole range of packages and measures to improve water quality; sadly, the hon. Lady and her colleagues did not.

Mary Kelly Foy: Following their field trip to the River Wear last month, year 5 and 6 pupils at St Thomas More School in Belmont were saddened by the levels of pollution in the river, especially the amount of plastic, so they have asked me to come here today to keep everyone on the right track. Can the Minister tell the pupils of St Thomas More School what the Government plan to do to help clean up the River Wear to protect local wildlife and preserve the beauty of the riverside?

Rebecca Pow: I commend the St Thomas More primary school pupils for going out, and it is wonderful to get our children out in the environment. It is interesting and perhaps disappointing that they found pollution, but the message to them is that this Government are absolutely on water and river pollution. Indeed, our new proposed target to reduce the amount of pollution in rivers such as the Wear in old abandoned mining areas by 50% by 2030 will make a genuine difference, as will our raft of other measures to tackle storm sewage overflows.¹

1.[Official Report, 10 May 2022, Vol. 714, c. 1MC.]

Household Budgets: Food Prices

2. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the impact of food price rises on household budgets. [906640]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Since we last gathered for DEFRA oral questions, our noble Friend Lord Plumb has, sadly, passed away. He was a titan of the agriculture industry, and National Farmers Union president throughout most of the 1970s, during a period of great change. He then went on to be President of the European Parliament. I know that the thoughts of all those in the House will be with his family.

Agricultural commodity prices fluctuate in any given year based on factors including energy costs and exchange rates. High energy costs exacerbated by events in Ukraine mean that there is going to be pressure on food prices as a result of increased input costs. The Government monitor household spending on food. Between 2008 and 2016, the proportion of household income spent on food by the poorest 20% of households was about 16%. It then dipped to under 15%, but we can expect that proportion to rise.

Mr Speaker: Order. We only have until 10 am for these questions, so we have to help each other.

Jessica Morden: Family-run farms such as Castle farm in my constituency are really being hit hard by the cost of feed, fuel and fertiliser, which in turn impacts on the cost of things such as eggs, as reported by BBC Wales today, and just adds to the soaring food prices that are hitting families so hard. Why are the Government not doing more, especially when the supermarkets are now cutting prices?

George Eustice: The Government are taking action. We have made available an additional £500 million to help households with increased pressure on household budgets. We are also taking measures, for instance, to remove tariffs on maize to try to reduce the costs of animal feeds. The hon. Member is right that the supermarkets will absorb some of these costs, but probably not all.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): What is my right hon. Friend doing to give the Groceries Code Adjudicator some more teeth to make sure that supermarkets do not inappropriately take advantage of the difficulties that we see with food prices? As he will well know, a lot of farmers face great pressure from supermarkets, and some would argue that they actually control the prices that farmers get when that is not really how it should be.

George Eustice: The supermarket adjudicator has, in recent years, made good progress in bringing transparency to the way relationships work between suppliers and the supermarkets. In addition, through the Agriculture Act 2020, we have introduced new powers so that in future we will be able to regulate and improve the transparency and fairness of contracts between farmers and processors.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Secretary of State Jim McMahon.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Britain is besieged by a cost of living crisis. Tax hikes and rocketing bills are making life harder for working people. We know that 4.7 million adults and 2.5 million children live in food poverty, 2.1 million food parcels were issued last year, and 1 million people will not eat at all today. Looking back on his nine years in the Department, what would the Secretary of State have done differently to improve rather than weaken the food security here in the UK?

George Eustice: Our food security, based on the amount of production we have in this country as a proportion of our consumption, has remained remarkably stable, at around 75%, for the past 22 years. Since we have left the European Union, we have had the ability to increase investment in farms and make available more grants for that, which we have done, and we have also introduced measures to improve transparency and fairness in the supply chain.

Jim McMahon: The Secretary of State knows that the cost of food will get much higher as farmers and producers grapple with increased costs and Government-inflicted labour shortages. As the Minister responsible for food security, will he urgently convene a cross-Government summit with the food industry, devolved and local government and charities to finally get ahead of the crisis—or are the Government once again just out for themselves, out of touch, and completely out of ideas?

George Eustice: I have already had many such meetings with the food industry and the agricultural industry about the current situation and the pressures on those input costs. The next meeting of the UK Agricultural Partnership in Scotland will focus specifically on the issue of food security.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The shadow Secretary of State will be pleased to hear that Cabinet Secretary Mairi Gougeon has called for a four-nation summit, and I believe the UK Government have agreed to that, so I am pleased that that will see some progress.

National Farmers Union of Scotland president Martin Kennedy has said that the UK is on the verge of food security concerns not seen since world war two due to covid, Brexit and the war in Ukraine, with feed, food and fertiliser costs and labour shortages drastically affecting the farming and food production sectors. London School of Economics analysis shows that Brexit alone raised food prices by 6% in the past year or so. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts Brexit losses to be more than £1,250 per person, and 178 times bigger than trade deal gains, which, combined, are worth less than 50p per person. What support packages is the Secretary of State considering for the farming and food production sectors to ensure that their extra costs will not also be passed on to consumers?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady is right: I have spoken to Mairi Gougeon of the Scottish Government, and we are going to have the next meeting of the UK Agricultural Partnership at the James Hutton Institute, which approached me to host that event, and we look forward to it. On her wider points, the truth is that after the 2016

referendum household spending on food actually went down, but food prices have always been governed principally by the price of energy and by exchange rates.

Flood Defences

3. **Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen flood defences. [906641]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The Government are investing a record £5.2 billion in a six-year flood defence investment programme running from 2021 to 2027. This will be invested in about 2,000 new projects and schemes to better protect 336,000 properties. In terms of the effect on the economy, it will save about £32 billion, which is really significant. Our 2015 to 2021 programme exceeded its expectations and better protected 314,000 properties.

Robert Largan: I welcome the Government's commitment to improving flood defences. I pay tribute to the work of Councillor Chris Sizeland, who has been working with me and local residents to tackle flooding around Chinley and Whitehough. In 2019 the town of Whaley Bridge was evacuated following a structural failure in the dam wall of Toddbrook reservoir. I am pleased to report to the House that the construction on the £16 million restoration of the reservoir is due to start next month. Will the Minister update the House on progress in implementing the recommendations of the Balmforth report on that incident so that we can get the tougher oversight needed to ensure that such incidents never happen again?

Rebecca Pow: We all remember that event well, and I am pleased to hear my hon. Friend's report that the reservoir has been made safe. Works were completed in 2019 and the long-term plan is under way. Actions to address 15 of the 22 recommendations made in the independent review after the incident are complete. In order to address the remaining recommendations, the EA will shortly publish guidance for reservoir owners.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The Minister will recall that earlier this year we launched "Connected by Water", an innovative flood strategy for South Yorkshire that will protect thousands of homes and businesses. I am grateful to the Minister for her support. Will she commit to working with my successor as Mayor, whoever they may be, so that together we can draw down all the investment needed to deliver the plan in full?

Rebecca Pow: We have been in regular touch about this, and this much wider approach to tackling everything connected with flooding is absolutely the right way. It is the direction that the Government are taking, including many nature-based solutions, and my door will always be open to speak to colleagues.

Plastic Waste

5. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce plastic waste. [906645]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): We have banned microbeads in rinse-off personal care products. We have restricted the supply of straws, stirrers and cotton buds. We have consulted on banning other single-use

plastic items, including plates and cutlery. We have conducted a call for evidence on problematic plastic items, including wet wipes, tobacco filters and sachets, and we are reviewing that information. Our ambition is to maximise resource, minimise waste and reduce, reuse, recycle. All plastic packaging will be reusable or recyclable by 2025.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Recycling plastics is energy and emission-intensive, so would we not be better to end the use of plastic bottles and concentrate on the deposit and return of glass ones?

Jo Churchill: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question, but actually it is about the use of the appropriate material for the appropriate product. Plastic is a good product when used sensibly and when it can be recycled, and we often now see 100% recycled plastic. We are introducing a deposit return scheme for drinks containers so that consumers can easily recycle them. News of that and work on it will be coming forward shortly, to be delivered in 2025.¹

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am sure the Minister will be aware that we are approaching Reusable Nappy Week, and I declare an interest as my 15-month-old son uses reusable nappies. What more can she do to encourage local authorities to have schemes that support new parents using reusable nappies? It has to be acknowledged that one of the biggest issues for landfill that has still not been dealt with is disposable nappies that have very limited ways of decomposing and cost huge amounts in terms of our carbon problems within the UK and around the world.

Jo Churchill: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising this issue. I have met companies that promote the use of reusable nappies. It is a great idea, and there are also schemes where people can rent and save money by doing so, and so on. All these things are well worth promoting, and I congratulate him on that. He is absolutely right that one of our biggest problems is trying to dispose of all those nappies. Making sure that they do not contaminate material that can be recycled is also hugely important, and all power to him.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Can the Minister also update the House on when we are likely to ban plastic wet wipes, which not only pollute the environment, but can cause sewage overflows?

Jo Churchill: I am working with the Under-Secretary of State for EFRA; my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) on this, because the challenge in sewers is acute with the build-up of wet wipes. As I say, we have recently conducted a consultation. That consultation has now finished. We are now reviewing the results, and we will be bringing forward more information shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response, and in that theme of positive strategy going forward, what discussions has she had with the Department of Health and Social Care about the packaging of medical supplies being more readily recyclable? The pandemic has clearly illustrated and highlighted the reliance on single-use plastic, and we must do everything we can to reduce that.

Jo Churchill: There are certain medical devices, where sterility and so on are important, where single-use plastic is the best product available, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that the team at the Department of Health and Social Care is working on making sure that products are not only more recyclable, but more reusable, because often it is about that repeatability.

Fertiliser Costs

6. Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to support farmers with rising fertiliser costs. [906646]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): We have announced that we will be supporting our growers by delaying the changes of use to urea fertiliser by a year. We have revised and improved statutory guidance on the farming rules for water, with slurry storage grants available to help farmers to implement them. We are cognisant of fertiliser costs. We are working across Government to ensure that we are aware of and working on the situation. I have an organic fertiliser task and finish group and I am talking to industry and farmers. We have the second meeting of our fertiliser taskforce shortly.

Fay Jones: I am extremely worried about the impact that rising fertiliser costs will have on our food production and food security in this country. Andy Matthews, who farms in Aberbrân, tells me that fertiliser was once £270 a tonne and is now £900 a tonne, which is a real risk for our food production capabilities. Innovation will be one of the ways out of that, so can the Minister update the House on the work that she is doing to ensure our long-term food security?

Jo Churchill: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend that innovation is key. We are seeing innovation come through at a tremendous pace to help farmers and growers with some of the key challenges that they are facing. For example, ensuring that we optimise the use of fertilisers is a huge saving, as is ensuring that we can drive yields. We are doing that by investing £38 million through the farming innovation programme. We have launched an £8 million competition for large R&D partnerships. This week, I was at the James Hutton Institute and the Roslin Institute. The amount of innovation that is coming through from farmers and innovators is something that this country should celebrate.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I have been contacted by several farmers in my constituency explaining that, because fertiliser and fuel costs are rocketing, they may not be able to afford to plant for next season. Does the Minister agree that now is the time to reverse the cut to the basic payment scheme to help our farmers survive the crisis?

Jo Churchill: I thank the hon. Lady for the question. That is too much of a blunt instrument that does not help the right farmers. We are supporting all farmers, which is why the fertiliser taskforce and the work across Government to keep an eye on the situation and to ensure that we are supporting correctly are important.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Some years ago, in high summer, people could often smell Worthing before they could see it, because of the rotting seaweed on the beaches that had previously been collected by farmers before commercial fertilisers became widely available. Now that we have the Sussex kelp restoration project, to which the Secretary of State has kindly already contributed, and given that seaweed has a major environmentally friendly use in feeding livestock and fertilising agricultural lands, will he look again at how we can promote it as a good, environmentally friendly alternative to commercial fertilisers?

Jo Churchill: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), has been down to see that work. Fantastic work is going on in other universities, such as Aberystwyth, on the use of seaweed for feed additives and so on. That is what I am talking about. The time is ripe for us to look at those other developments; what is going on in his area is very exciting.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree, though, that we must be careful about what we put on our soil in terms of weed killers and nutrients? According to Cambridge University, soil degradation is one of the biggest challenges to our planet. We have been mistreating our soil for many years. Can we be careful about what we do with it?

Jo Churchill: Indeed, soil is the main plank of the sustainable farming incentive. It lies at the heart of ensuring that our land is as productive as it can be. I agree with the hon. Gentleman and that is where innovation can play its part to ensure that we breed plants that use fewer pesticides and resources. All those things not only enhance our farmland but ensure that our soil is the key ingredient so that we can all feed and improve the biodiversity of our country.

Mr Speaker: I now call the shadow Minister, Daniel Zeichner.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Cost, of course, is incredibly important but so is availability. The UK food system is dependent on two factories for CO₂, one of which has been shut for months and the other has been operating at relatively low levels. Before Christmas, the Government were slow to intervene and coy about the terms of the agreement. Can the Minister tell the House today what that agreement was, how much it cost and what the plan is to ensure that the UK food system is secure in future?

Jo Churchill: This is a highly complex area which obviously involves CO₂ and various other things that are important to industries right across the country. We are keeping a very close eye on this, but I say to our farmers that they should have confidence and make sure they put forward their orders so we have sustainable demand, which will of course improve the supply chain.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): Sadly, food security has come into sharp relief again with the dreadful situation in Ukraine. Our fantastic

farmers in Cumbria and across the UK continue to produce high-quality food in these difficult times but, as we have heard, there are increasing pressures from fertiliser costs, animal feed costs and fuel costs. Can my hon. Friend assure me that there will be cross-Government work to support our farmers to mitigate these pressures so that they can continue to produce the highest quality food?

Jo Churchill: We maintain a constant dialogue across Government, keeping all these things in view. Through the sustainable farming incentive we are making sure that we allow farmers to plant and be rewarded for planting nitrogen-fixing plants, for example, and that we are making the most of all the technology and innovation to help minimise inputs and keep control on those costs. We are doing that right across the Department.

Invasion of Ukraine: UK Food Security

7. **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on food security in the UK.

[906647]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Ukraine is a significant global producer of many agricultural commodities, such as wheat and sunflower oil. The UK is largely self-sufficient in wheat production and imports a small amount, predominantly from Canada. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has had a significant impact on commodity prices. We are taking steps to assist the food industry in using alternatives to sunflower oil and working with like-minded countries around the world to ensure markets remain open and trade flows continue.

Richard Thomson: The conflict in Ukraine shows the fragility of many of our supply lines, and it has certainly increased the cost of many inputs and is disrupting the sector considerably. In order to minimise these effects, will the Secretary of State look again with his colleagues at having a more flexible immigration strategy and at uniting again on our sanitary and phytosanitary approach with the European Union, and take steps to make sure we are putting our food security on the same level as our energy security?

George Eustice: We do recognise the importance of food security; under the Agriculture Act 2020 we introduced a new requirement that every three years the Government must publish an assessment of our food security, and we monitor that closely. On the wider point, the reality is that food prices and international commodity prices have always been linked very closely to the price of energy, and the sharp spike in gas prices is inevitably going to have an impact, but overall we are still self-sufficient for about 75% of the foods we consume.

UK-Faroese Fishing Grounds

8. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with his Faroese counterpart on access for Russian fishing vessels to shared UK-Faroese fishing grounds.

[906648]

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): We do not have jurisdiction over the fishing activities of vessels operating in the special area under a licence issued by the Faroes. However, we have urged the Faroese Fisheries Minister, Foreign Minister and Prime Minister to stop Russian vessels fishing there.

Mr Carmichael: As it happens, I had my own opportunity to make exactly these representations to the Faroese Prime Minister yesterday and I am sure that, like the Minister, I was able to welcome the undertaking that the Faroese will look at not continuing this arrangement when it expires at the end of the year. However, does she agree that, as I said to the Faroese Prime Minister yesterday, the war in Ukraine is happening in the here and now and, while the Faroese have a good and profitable record of playing both sides against the middle, this is one occasion where they really need to pick a side?

Victoria Prentis: I could not agree more, and I hear that that was very much the tone of the useful meeting the all-party group on fisheries had with the Faroese Prime Minister yesterday. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that Government Ministers have also made that message loud and clear at all levels.

UK Food Production

9. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the level of food that will be produced by UK farmers in each of the next three years. [906649]

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): Fortunately, we in this country have a high degree of food security. We currently produce about 60% of all the food we need and 74% of all the food we can grow or rear here. We monitor the level of production extremely carefully and, as the Secretary of State said earlier, published a detailed report at the end of last year.

Justin Madders: As the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), referred to earlier, last autumn CF Fertilisers in my constituency stopped production because of high energy costs, and it has not reopened because the demand for its products simply is not there. It really is a concern that farmers are not putting food into the ground because of the high prices. I wonder what the knock-on effect will be in the next two or three years, particularly on availability and cost for consumers as well as my constituents' jobs. We have had a list of things that the Government are doing, but surely it says something that even now, with rocketing fuel prices and food prices, there is simply not enough demand for that factory to reopen. Does the Minister agree that more must be done?

Victoria Prentis: I chaired a fertiliser taskforce several weeks ago, and the strong message from Government, those who work in the industry and those who supply fertiliser to the industry was that we should have confidence in this year's fertiliser supply, buy fertiliser and use it as required. We will continue to work together to monitor the situation.

Mr Speaker: We come to the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Neil Parish.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I associate myself with the Secretary of State's comments on Lord Plumb, who for over 70 years really fought for agriculture and food in this country.

Further to the great question from my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), the Agriculture Act 2020 requires the Government to conduct and assess our national food security every five years. The Minister has said that that will be reduced to every three years. In 2020, after food supply chain challenges arose during the pandemic, the Select Committee recommended that the Government commit to producing a report every year and, with the situation in Ukraine, global gas prices, pressures on food supply, severe labour shortages and the high price of fertiliser, that is more important than ever. Will my hon. Friend therefore reconsider producing an annual report?

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend knows that food is always at the very top of my agenda, and the nation's food security is as well. He and I have discussed the right frequency for that report's sequencing many times. It is a substantial piece of academic work, and I was proud of the version that we published at the end of last year. We have always said that we will undertake more frequent reporting if that is required, but I think that, for that serious piece of work, the three-year timescale is about right.

Topical Questions

T1. [906657] **Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused shocks to international commodity markets. Over the last few days, I have been in the United States to meet political leaders and the US farming industry to discuss the challenges that they face and the global situation. There are many similarities in our concerns, particularly about rising fertiliser costs and labour availability. This week, the UK issued a joint statement with the US on the importance of keeping markets open so that we can move wheat and other essential commodities to nations that were previously reliant on Ukraine for their supply.

Bim Afolami: I strongly support the Government and the Department in their introduction of biodiversity net gain, which could be transformative across the east and south-east of England in particular. Will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that biodiversity net gain becomes mandatory on all construction sites in England by the end of 2023?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend is right about the importance of biodiversity net gain. It will ensure that we can get the housing development that we need while protecting nature and building back greener. We have committed to a two-year transitional period to ensure that biodiversity net gain is introduced in that timeframe.

Mr Speaker: We come to the shadow Minister, Ruth Jones.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): The National Audit Office's damning report on waste crime published this week has revealed the Tory Government's shameful record on prosecutions and enforcement. When will the Minister finally get a grip on tackling waste crime and at least set a robust and achievable target for precisely how many criminals the Environment Agency will prosecute this year?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): We have a suite of measures that will help crack down on that. Yes, the report was damning and showed the size of the problem, but we have established the Joint Unit for Waste Crime to disrupt serious and organised waste crime and the Environment Agency has enhanced powers, as do local councils. Local authorities have the legal powers to take enforcement action and I urge them to use them. We have bolstered those powers. We have awarded £450,000 across 11 councils for the use of innovative technology, such as CCTV cameras, to really drive down on this issue.

T3. [906659] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend's commitment to end the scourge of fly-tipping across the country. It is the No. 1 issue that every one of my constituents raises when I speak to them. Can she assure us that there will be a process for urban and suburban councils to get funding from the Department to ensure that they can combat this scourge in our society?

Jo Churchill: I am working on the next tranche of funding to help tackle this scourge. My hon. Friend talks tirelessly about the challenge in Harrow. I would be really happy to come and see the issue for myself, and discuss with his constituents what more we can do, because Conservatives absolutely want to get rid of this blight.

T2. [906658] **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I invite the Minister to visit Ellesmere Port, where we have many fly-tipping hotspots as well. If there are to be further rounds of grants, I urge her to ensure the criteria for selection are transparent and clear, so we all know what we are looking for to get approvals to deal with this issue.

Jo Churchill: Noted.

T4. [906661] **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): Last year in my constituency, storm overflows discharged untreated sewage into the Thames estuary no less than 48 times for the equivalent of 10 whole days, which is totally unacceptable. Will the Secretary of State or the Minister tell me please what is being done to stop water companies discharging sewage into the Thames estuary around Southend?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I agree that that is completely unacceptable, which is why the Government are absolutely on it with all the new duties under the Environment Act 2021 and our direction to Ofwat. We have just launched the storm sewage discharge reduction plan consultation, which will set out how we will revolutionise how water companies tackle sewage discharges. I must also mention the Thames tideway tunnel, which is due to complete.

T5. [906662] **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Farmers across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are very innovative and want to diversify. Can I ask the Minister a straightforward question? What is being done to encourage farmers to do just that to help the economy?

Jo Churchill: Up to 2028-29, we will be investing £270 million across a programme of innovation to boost research and development, and innovation. I spoke to Northern Irish farmers only this week. They are with us in driving that forward.

T6. [906663] **Mr John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), will my hon. Friend consider giving special designation to shellfish waters, such as those in the Blackwater estuary where Maldon oysters are grown, to protect them from contamination from untreated sewage discharges?

Rebecca Pow: I have been working closely with my hon. Friend the Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food on this issue. I can confirm that Blackwater, in my right hon. Friend's constituency, is one of 96 designated shellfish waters, which are designated to protect economically significant shellfish production.

T7. [906664] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I tell the Minister about the very good meeting yesterday with National Farmers Union Scotland and Scotland Office Ministers on the operation of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, the powers under the Agriculture Act 2020 and the wider problems of keeping the integrity of the UK internal market? It was pretty clear, however, that those issues affect farmers right across the whole of the United Kingdom, and she can expect to hear from the Scotland Office in early course as a consequence of our meeting. When she receives those representations, will she do as the Scotland Office has done and bring in all the farmers?

The Minister for Farming Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): I had a good meeting with Lesley Griffiths and Mairi Gougeon last night. We will continue to discuss these matters.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Further to the questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), the Environmental Audit Committee published its report on water quality in rivers, which was widely well received across the House. The Government are supposed to respond to a Select Committee report within 60 days. I granted an extension to 90 days. I think we are now at 105 days. Can we please have this report today?

Rebecca Pow: I am well aware of that issue, as my right hon. Friend knows—indeed, I have discussed it with him—and I absolutely am chasing this up. If I could, I would get the response to him today, but it will come very soon.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Input costs in agriculture are at a tremendous high, including for feed, fuel, fertiliser, energy and wages. On that last point, the Home Office's pernicious surcharge on growers of £10.10

an hour has no basis in reality. Will the Secretary of State explain what the Home Office is thinking, and will he come to speak to my local growers to see how they can make their way through this unnecessarily difficult situation?

George Eustice: In introducing the seasonal agriculture workers scheme, we were very keen for it not to undermine the domestic labour market and prevent people from joining it. We wanted to give industry access to labour, but not to cheap labour. That is why we followed the Migration Advisory Committee's recommendation to have a slightly higher minimum wage for those coming in under the scheme.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): In Wales and Aberconwy, farmers have told me of their concerns that an unintended consequence of encouraging tree planting is, specifically, the creation of a new asset class by carbon capture incentives, which encourage the purchase and forestation of viable upland farms. Will my right hon. Friend reassure them that he has that under control?

George Eustice: I reassure my hon. Friend that we are well aware of that challenge. My noble Friend Lord Benyon is leading a piece of work on the green market, including looking at where we should allow private capital to support the development of new forestry.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Further to the questions about sewage, there are fears that dogs swimming in rivers will be poisoned by sewage. Will the Secretary of State make it mandatory for water companies to report on the number of dogs and animals poisoned in their rivers and name and shame the worst offenders?

Rebecca Pow: We have been clear about our work to crack down on pollution in rivers. We have just launched our targets, which have all the details, and our storm sewage overflows discharge plan consultation. I recommend that the hon. Lady looks at that and puts her views in.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): Kingfisher Seafoods in my constituency is one of the largest producers of cockles and mussels in the UK. It has been awarded a grant by the Marine Management Organisation to move into depuration, but unfortunately, the equipment that it needs, to buy will not be available by the time the grant expires. May I urge the Minister to apply some of her good sense to the MMO to get it to work with Kingfisher on a solution to that?

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituents, and particularly for that seafood company. We have discussed it before, and I undertake to look into how we can extend the time available for the application process.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): A successful slush syrup manufacturer in my constituency recently reformulated its recipe to reduce sugar, replacing it with glycerine as the anti-freezing agent. As a result of the war in Ukraine and covid, glycerine has become unobtainable, or obtainable only at absolutely exorbitant prices. Will the Minister urgently meet me to discuss how we can make sure that that successful manufacturer keeps manufacturing?

Victoria Prentis: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that issue. As I said, we have good food security. We are very fortunate that the war in Ukraine has not directly impacted most of the food that we eat, but in isolated cases, there are real difficulties.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Parish Ministry

1. **Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to strengthen its parish ministry. [906628]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church of England is distributing £160 million between 2020 and 2022 through our lowest income communities fund and our strategic development funding. That funding sustains the Church's ministry in many low-income communities and that footprint, across the whole country, is incredibly precious to us and we do not want to lose it.

Robin Millar: The Church plays a key part in many communities in Aberconwy, never more so than during the pandemic. The Church in Wales is encouraging its lay members to use their skills, time and resources to serve their communities. Will my hon. Friend give an assurance that lay workers will benefit from the levelling-up fund to aid that ministry of service to their communities?

Andrew Selous: I know that my hon. Friend and many of his constituents hugely appreciate the key role that the Church plays in communities across Aberconwy. My colleagues in the Church of England are always glad for opportunities to exchange ideas for and experiences of strengthening parish ministry with the Church in Wales, with which we have a very warm relationship.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give some attention to what the Church of England is doing to stimulate the ministry up and down the country by giving far more incentives to get involved in sustainability issues and green issues? At the church at which I worship, it is a breath of fresh air that gives focus to the community. Can we have more of it encouraged in the Church?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He will know that many churches are now eco-churches and there is a methodology to ensure that they are doing it properly. I can also tell him that the Church Commissioners have embarked on a major regenerative agriculture programme. He is absolutely right that we need to talk more about the subject to encourage young people in particular into the Church.

Freedom of Religion and Belief

2. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to promote the freedom of religion and belief globally. [906629]

Andrew Selous: In addition to the involvement that the Church will have with the international ministerial conference on freedom of religion and belief that my hon. Friend is helping to organise in July, we will equip bishops from across the world to respond as effectively as possible to violations of freedom of religion at the Lambeth conference later that month. The Church also continues to work with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on the implementation of the Truro review.

Fiona Bruce: Does my hon. Friend agree that people may not be aware that freedom of religion or belief is one of the fundamental rights for which people in Ukraine are fighting? In areas of Ukraine such as Luhansk, where pro-Russian separatists have taken areas in the past few years, churches are now required to register to meet. All the Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Pentecostal and other Protestant churches have been refused registration, so they meet in a climate of fear.

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend has done the House a great service in putting the matter on the record, because I do not think that it was widely known that in the areas that Russia had previously occupied in Ukraine, freedom of religion had been restricted in such a serious way. I am sure that she agrees with the Archbishop of York, who wrote in *The Yorkshire Post* on Good Friday that we

“must all rise up to make sure Putin does not win”, so that what she is talking about does not continue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Has discussion been raised with the global bishops to ascertain how the thriving Anglican Church in Africa can further be instrumental in promoting the treasured freedom of religious belief?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise the issue. Unfortunately, there are serious abuses of freedom of religion and belief across large parts of Africa. The subject will be a major issue for discussion at the Lambeth conference, and we are working with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to make improvements in the area.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Richard Holden—not here, again.

Affordable and Sustainable Housing

4. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to help create affordable and sustainable housing on its lands. [906632]

Andrew Selous: The Church Commissioners are supporting the Church of England’s vision to put its land and resources to good use, as outlined in the “Coming Home” report last year. From our portfolio of development land, we aim to deliver 29,000 new homes, more than 30% of which will be classed as affordable. They range from small edge-of-village schemes to major masterplanned new developments. We aim to respect the planet in the way we build homes where people will thrive.

Selaine Saxby: In my North Devon constituency, we have an acute affordable housing crisis, which was debated only yesterday in Westminster Hall. Will my hon. Friend provide further detail on what the Church might be able to do to assist?

Andrew Selous: I know how hard my hon. Friend works to ensure affordable housing across her constituency. I can tell her that we are always on the lookout to do more in Devon; in the village of Thorverton, we have built 20 new homes, 10 of which are affordable, and the site has won “best rural development” at the Devon rural housing awards. Of course, we will seek every opportunity to do more to help my hon. Friend’s constituents.

Illegal Migrant Crossings in the Channel

5. **Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): What recent discussions the Archbishop of Canterbury has had with his French counterparts on illegal migrant crossings in the Channel. [906633]

Andrew Selous: The Church of England is part of the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches and the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe, and works in all those bodies to respond to the challenges of the largest movement of people since the end of the second world war.

Chris Loder: In Dorset we are taking care of 20 orphaned children who have lost their trafficked parents in illegal but also fatal crossings of the English channel. Now that the Church of England bishops are making co-ordinated political statements, can my hon. Friend tell me what advice the Archbishop of Canterbury is offering to prevent such situations from happening in the first place so that no more children are orphaned during illegal channel crossings?

Andrew Selous: Let me first thank all those in Dorset who are caring for the children who lost their parents while they were being trafficked across the English channel. Our hearts go out to them, and we must do everything possible to prevent further such fatalities.

I can tell my hon. Friend that bishops in the House of Lords have called for more safe routes for allowing asylum seekers to apply at UK embassies, and for better co-operation with the French on the processing of applications across the channel.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Archbishops of both Canterbury and York have, rightly, been outspoken about the plight of refugees. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Church leaders have an important role to play in contributing a prophetic voice, a voice of conscience, as part of the process of providing checks and balances, advocacy and accountability to the nation, in respect of refugees and other vulnerable groups?

Andrew Selous: The Archbishop of Canterbury published what I thought was a very balanced article about these issues in *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday. The hon. Lady has made a valid point: while the Church will cause discomfort to all Governments and, if I remember

rightly, did so to her party just before the last general election, I would far rather live in a country where that is the case than in Russia, where the Church is unstintingly supporting an illegal and barbaric invasion.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I was recently humbled to be able to attend a vigil for peace organised by the Penrith and Eden Refugee Network and local churches. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking churches, faith groups and community groups in my constituency and across the country for all that they are doing to support the people of Ukraine and refugees through prayer groups, vigils, and donations of supplies and financial aid?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but the question is not relevant. Unfortunately, questions must be linked to the main question. Refugees: go on, Andrew, have a go at it.

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an important point. The Church is partnering the Government in hosting many of the Ukrainian refugees for whom his constituents are quite properly caring.

Family Relationships, Parenting and Marriage

6. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support family relationships, parenting and marriage. [906634]

Andrew Selous: It is precisely because the Church of England recognises the profound importance of families, parents and marriage that the archbishops have set up a commission on families and households, which will make recommendations to both the Church and wider society on how we can strengthen these vital relationships.

Mr Hollobone: According to a recent report from the Centre for Social Justice,

“Marriage has become a middle-class secret. Among high income couples...83% have tied the knot; among low-income parents...only 55% are married. This ‘marriage gap’ is a social justice issue”.

Is the Church of England concerned about that, and if so, what is it going to do about it?

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an extremely important social justice issue. The Church is indeed concerned about it, which is why the archbishops established the commission. Evidence shows that half of unmarried men cite cost as a reason for not marrying. I think we can learn from the churches that have often provided not only a service full of love and meaning but free, individually tailored wedding dresses, with the congregation helping with food, drink and flowers. Actions like these can ensure that the joys of marriage are shared equally across every income group. However, the current situation should concern us all.

Holy Orders: Candidates

7. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to increase the number of candidates entering Holy Orders. [906635]

Andrew Selous: In 2020, we saw the largest number of people presenting for ordination in a decade, following a sustained commitment by the Church to increase vocations, especially from global majority heritage candidates and women. There was a 14% increase in 2020, compared with 2019, and although the pandemic has caused a temporary reduction, we believe that the numbers will soon return to pre-pandemic levels.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What do clergy say is the most rewarding aspect of their ministry, and might that be used to encourage others to take Holy Orders?

Andrew Selous: Clergy deserve our thanks for all they do to promote spiritual and material wellbeing and especially for what they did during the pandemic, which massively increased demands on them. To answer my right hon. Friend’s question, many would say that the opportunity to share the good news of Jesus in teaching worship and in service to others inspires them, and what a privilege it is to be present at the most significant moments of a family’s life, whether that be baptism, marriage, comforting the dying or a funeral. If I may, I should like to pass on my particular thanks to the Rev. Chris Lawton for the exemplary way in which he took my mother-in-law’s funeral last Friday.

Mr Speaker: I am very sad to hear that.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Digital Political Advertising

8. **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What assessment the commission has made of the impact of digital political advertising on free and fair elections. [906636]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): Digital advertising offers significant opportunities for campaigners to engage voters, and it accounts for an increasingly large proportion of election campaign spending. However, research conducted by the Electoral Commission shows that many voters have concerns about the transparency and truthfulness of digital political advertising. The commission runs a campaign to support voters to understand who is using online advertising to influence their vote, and provides educational materials to promote political literacy. It has also made recommendations to the UK’s Governments, social media companies and campaigners to strengthen transparency for voters.

Kevin Brennan: Digital advertising political advertising and in general, is largely unregulated. This allows for the proliferation of misleading adverts and leaves us open to the influence of foreign actors, and all of us across the House should be concerned about that. Has the Electoral Commission made any specific recommendations to the Government as to how new regulation should be introduced to ensure that we protect our democracy?

Christian Matheson: The commission recognises that many social media companies have taken welcome steps towards increasing transparency around online campaigning, but it also believes that more can be done to deliver the transparency that voters expect. It has recommended that social media companies should publish information about referendum or election adverts on their platforms with standardised data about costs and targeting. It has welcomed the provisions on digital imprints in the UK Government's Elections Bill, and it will continue to build on its good working relations with the social media companies to ensure compliance with these measures.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): In Scotland before the Scottish parliamentary elections we saw a number of campaign groups spring up using digital advertising to peddle political messages that used unincorporated association structures to hide the source of their finances. Has the Electoral Commission considered investigating the use of unincorporated associations to evade final transparency in politics?

Christian Matheson: The commission is well aware of this issue, but in the recent Elections Bill the Government did not propose any change in the statutory framework under which the commission operates. There is an issue over people and organisations that are not registered as political actors putting out social media posts, because the current digital imprints provisions seemingly do not apply to them. That is an issue that the commission is aware of.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I declare an interest, in that my wife is a local authority member—and what a good job she does! I have to say that.

A constituent recently brought to my attention some Facebook advertising by my local Conservative Association encouraging people to report potholes and other street repairs through the association. I have no problem with issues like that being raised, but I do not understand why the association could not just direct people to the council website where there is an online reporting facility. Will my hon. Friend look into the reasons why that arrangement exists?

Christian Matheson: I shall also declare an interest: my hon. Friend is my constituency next-door neighbour, and I also know his wife, who is a councillor, although neutrality restricts me from saying what an excellent councillor she is. In answer to his question, if the

advertising is legal under the current framework, there would be no reason for the commission to have a concern over it.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Support for Arts and Culture

10. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What recent steps the Church of England has taken to support arts and culture; and if he will make a statement. [906638]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church Commissioners, alongside the Cathedral Music Trust, supported cathedral choirs in 2020. Funding was also provided to support the heritage skills of stonemasons, glaziers and others. The culture recovery fund provided more than £60 million for 580 churches and cathedrals, and a partnership with the Wolfson Foundation, the Pilgrim Trust and the National Churches Trust has provided grants to pay for the care of historic interiors and collections.

Michael Fabricant: I am grateful for that answer. I do not always praise the Church of England, but I praise it for these initiatives. My hon. Friend will know what a beautiful city Lichfield is, as I hope you may find out soon, Mr Speaker—I will say no more on that. The cathedral is beautiful, too, and it is not only used for worship; it is also used for the wonderful Lichfield festival. May I invite my hon. Friend to come to the Lichfield festival to see and hear for himself what goes on in that beautiful cathedral?

Mr Speaker: I believe the Second Church Estates Commissioner will be put up in a house nearby, too.

Andrew Selous: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am pleased to learn that Lichfield cathedral is the main venue for the Lichfield festival. Having seen pictures of the stunning light displays, I would very much like to visit. I pay tribute again to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) for being such a champion for his cathedral, as well as all things Lichfield. I encourage the Members of Parliament for the other 41 cathedrals to follow his example and champion their cathedrals in the way he champions his.

Homes for Ukraine: Visa Application Centres

10.31 am

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to provide an update on the working of the visa application centres in relation to the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): The whole country is united in horror at Putin's grotesque war, and we stand with the Ukrainian people. Many in this Chamber wear it as a badge of honour that they were sanctioned by the Kremlin yesterday due to that support.

We are delighted that so many British people have already put forward generous offers of help to displaced Ukrainians. Nearly 90,000 visas have been issued so that people can rebuild their life in the UK through the Ukraine family scheme and Homes for Ukraine. Our visa application centre footprint in Europe has traditionally been small, in line with the fairly limited demand. This is because EU nationals had freedom of movement and, post-Brexit, EU nationals do not need visas to visit the UK, with applications from European economic area nationals for key routes such as skilled worker and student visas able to be done from home via our fully digital application route.

As the Ukrainian crisis escalated, we increased appointment capacity across Europe, going from offering about 2,000 appointments a week to offering 13,500 appointments a week. In the run-up to the recent Russian invasion, we established a new visa application centre in Lviv, and we kept our visa application centre in Kyiv running right up until the Russian attack was launched. We also established a new application point in Rzeszów near the Polish border with Ukraine. We were able to offer walk-in and on-the-day appointments to customers wishing to apply for the initial family member concession route and were able to fulfil all appointments wherever they were required.

I am pleased to advise the House that visa application centre appointments are readily available in all locations across Europe, and in the majority of locations are available on the same day for customers looking to book a slot. As we have throughout, we will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Ukraine.

Wendy Chamberlain: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

We all know that the conflict in Ukraine has been devastating, and the resulting humanitarian crisis is outwith the control of any Government. Members of this House are now familiar with UK Visas and Immigration and the Homes for Ukraine scheme, but refugees—not “customers”—without passports are required to go through additional checks at in-country visa application centres, following which their permission to travel is provided in person. The majority of those who are required to go through this are very young children who do not yet have their own passport.

The problem is that the VACs are not providing anywhere near the service required and the Home Office seems unable to do anything about it. VACs have been

outsourced to TLScontact for the past nine years, with the contract renewed twice. However, before the current crisis, an inspection found that TLScontact was missing targets, there was a lack of support for vulnerable applicants and there was no transparency from the Home Office in relation to the service level.

My own constituents' case exemplifies these problems. Sofia and Kirill are four and seven. They have experienced significant trauma from the devastation they saw before leaving Ukraine. Their application was initially submitted in mid-March. I am pleased to say that, finally, it was granted last night, but this was weeks after the adults in their group were able to travel. In that time, the family made three visits to the VAC, each time waiting for hours and then being sent away. Each child was issued documentation that was factually incorrect and had to be reprocessed, and throughout this the family were moving between temporary accommodations in Poland, with no certainty and no funds. My office has been extensively involved in trying to conclude this case, with representations made to senior Home Office officials and via the Minister for Refugees. Even they could not get answers. It was admitted by one official that this was not the service we should expect at a basic level, never mind for families fleeing war.

What are the current oversight arrangements for TLScontact and for its day-to-day operation of VACs? What steps are being taken to improve such oversight and to prevent the current black hole, whereby no one has overall responsibility for their proper functioning? What was the outcome of the Minister for Refugees' visit to see the areas surrounding Ukraine? Did he visit any of the VACs? What issues did he identify and what steps are being taken to resolve them? What steps are being taken to ensure immediately that FAVs—forms for affixing the visa—are issued to families promptly and without error? What steps are being taken to ensure proper communication with families? I am not asking for an update on a particular case. I am asking a fundamental question about operations.

Kevin Foster: It is worth outlining where we see the future of our immigration system. As I touched on in my statement, EEA nationals already make fully online applications, for things such as student and skilled worker visas. When we rolled out the British nationals overseas route last year, we included a fully digital application system, which the vast majority of applicants have used. Our future work is to move away from people having to go to a VAC every time they want to apply for particular types of visas, including visit, student and skilled worker visas, and for a range of products that people apply for. For example, we will be moving to more of a system where we re-use biometrics or are able to extract biometrics via passports. Our future vision for the UK immigration system looks towards a time when a lot fewer people will be going to a VAC than are doing so today, and that technology will be used. We have seen that move in the Ukraine schemes. For example, about 90% of those who have now been granted visas under the Homes for Ukraine scheme have done this via the biometric bypass: they have not had to attend a VAC. We are also looking to roll out next month the system that will allow those who have come to this country with six months on a permission to travel letter to then be able to apply for the full visa from home, as

[Kevin Foster]

would those looking to travel after that. So we are looking to reduce significantly the number of people who need to use a VAC.

That said, for those who do not have valid international passports the VACs perform a role of carrying out safeguarding checks, particularly in relation to children. For those of a younger age, we are not looking at the same security checks as we would do for an adult. For children, we are ensuring that key safeguarding checks are done. As we have said, our feedback at the moment is that there is wide availability of appointments, and that a large number of visas have been issued and people have arrived in the UK, having been through that process, in relatively significant numbers. We continue to work with our provider to improve the service on offer, but, as I say, our long-term vision is moving strongly away from VACs and things such as the issuing of vignettes, and instead looking towards e-visa permissions, which will mean that people do not need to go to collect something physical in their passport to allow them to travel to the UK. That is where the vision is going, but the changes we have made to the two systems, allowing the biometric bypass, means that the vast majority of people now making applications need to go nowhere near a VAC.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): A member of my staff spends a significant proportion of each day working on visas for Ukrainians, and I thank her and the hub team here, who have been supporting us all with this. Does my hon. Friend realise that one common problem is that the visa is approved but the person in question does not get the email giving them permission to travel for quite some time afterwards? Is he aware of that? Is he working on it? Will he set out what is being done about it?

Kevin Foster: We have been aware of an issue with the system in terms of the current process of the decision being made and then the visa dispatched. We have a particular team working on ensuring dispatch. The changes we will make in respect of the fully online system next month will mean that a lot of it becomes automated, which will resolve that particular issue. We have been aware of some instances and have a specific team that makes sure that decisions are dispatched.

I very much appreciate my hon. Friend's comments about the hub, which has been assisting Members and ensuring that people's visas get dispatched. As I say, we have now seen nearly 90,000 visas issued and significant numbers of people arriving here in the UK having used the biometric bypass route or been to a visa application centre. That indicates to us that the system is now working effectively.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Minister.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Ukraine is on the frontline of the fight for the values that we in Britain hold dear: democracy, liberty and self-determination. It has therefore been truly inspiring to see 200,000 British households willing to open their doors to Ukrainians—largely women and children—who are fleeing Putin's barbaric war. Somehow, though, the Home Secretary has managed to turn this inspirational story of British generosity into a bureaucratic nightmare.

The Opposition of course welcome the two visa routes that the Government have opened, but we have grave concerns that the Home Secretary's poor leadership has meant that the ambitions and generosity of the British people are not being matched by a Government who seem to be more interested in chasing headlines than fulfilling practical tasks and duties.

The latest figures show that of the 74,000 visa applications under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, just 11,100 have arrived—and this is several weeks after the scheme went live. In these matters, I usually try to assume that such things are down to cock-up rather than conspiracy—especially when it comes to the Home Office under this Home Secretary—but will the Minister expand on claims by a whistleblower who was contracted by the Home Office that the Government are deliberately withholding visas for a single child in a wider family to prevent the whole family from arriving? I have been alerted to the case of a family who were told that their visas were ready, but when they went to collect them, the one for their three-year-old child was not there. There are many other deeply troubling cases of this nature. How on earth can this be happening? I sincerely hope it is not deliberate.

Members from all parties have been deeply frustrated by the speed at which the Home Office has responded on casework. For too many, the so-called hotline has gone stone cold. Yesterday, the queue for the MP queries desk in Portcullis House was more than three hours long. What is the Home Secretary doing to sort this mess out? Why is it that, even though she has taken caseworkers off the Afghan scheme—which has run to a standstill, with 12,000 Afghans stuck in hotels, at huge expense to the British taxpayer—she still cannot manage to organise a system that works for Ukraine? It is simply not good enough. I hope the Home Secretary and the Minister can provide answers. Our constituents deserve them, and so do those Ukrainians whose relatives are sacrificing their lives in the fight for freedom.

Kevin Foster: I am aware of the claims—false claims, I have to say—that there is a deliberate move to withhold individual visas. Those claims are absolute nonsense. [Interruption.] I hear chuntering, but it is certainly not the case. When some people apply through the fully digital system and some via a VAC, some of them may get a decision shortly after others in their party, but that is not a deliberate design or policy.

The hon. Gentleman referred to some of the numbers. Nearly 90,000 visas have now been issued and we expect to see many more people arriving in our country shortly. That shows the breadth of people's generosity. This is one of the biggest resettlement schemes into communities throughout our country in many years. That shows people's generosity when faced with the situation in Ukraine.

We are aware of some issues. As we have already heard, most people have been quite grateful for the hub, which will continue to operate during recess, given the support it provides to Members of Parliament. We are aware of the queues this week and action has been taken to resolve the issue.

Overall, we can see how the scheme is running and the generosity of the British people coming forward. That is what should be reflected when we talk about the scheme.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I have a constituent who is seeking to take in a Ukrainian family. They made their way to a visa application centre six weeks ago, but they have still not received the okay to make their way to the UK. They are being told that that is because there is a pause for those with Russian passports. Can the Minister confirm whether that is the case?

Kevin Foster: Third-country nationals who are part of an overall Ukrainian family or household can be covered. My hon. Friend will appreciate that there are some different considerations in relation to Russian or Belarusian passport holders. We are conscious that in Ukraine there will be a number of people who, I think it safe to say, are no fans of Vladimir Putin, given what he is doing to them, their families and their neighbours. Certainly, they qualify, but there are some slightly different considerations if we are dealing with someone who holds a Russian passport.

Mr Speaker: We come to the SNP spokesperson, Stuart C. McDonald.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): We are seeing the biggest movement of refugees across Europe since the second world war, and the Home Secretary's response is to erect a massive wall of bureaucracy and red tape. That bureaucracy is causing totally avoidable misery for the Ukrainians fleeing war, and anger and frustration for generous hosts right across the UK. We on the SNP Benches have said it before and I will say it again: let us just scrap these visa requirements now.

The Minister will cite security again, but I will push back on that. Does he accept that around 140 countries—not just those in the EU—allow Ukrainians to arrive without visas? Will he confirm that scrapping the visas does not mean no checks? How many nationalities does his Department already allow to arrive into the United Kingdom without visas? He is not saying that there are no security checks for them, so why do we not apply the same principles to Ukrainians?

The UK shares an open land border with a country that does not require visas from Ukrainians. Does that not undermine somewhat the security arguments that the Minister keeps putting to us? There is still time to fix this, but not much. Let us just scrap the visa requirements now.

Kevin Foster: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to hear that the Government take a different view. It is for each country to decide its policy based on the intelligence and the assessments it receives, and that is partly driven by its geographical situation and, in Europe, whether it is part of the Schengen border-free zone.

Our position is based on the advice we have received. We have changed some of the systems of application based on that advice, and all our policies, particularly around visa national or non-visa national status for particular nationalities, are driven by a comprehensive assessment that includes security and other matters. I hope colleagues will appreciate why I will not outline the exact details on the Floor of the House, in a public forum.

As I have touched on, nearly 90,000 visas have already been issued. We are certainly seeing more progress every day, and we look forward to welcoming a large number of people to the UK.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Families in my constituency have very generously offered to house Ukrainian refugees. I was going to raise the plight of the Lykholit family from Ukraine, who applied on 18 March, but they have received their visas today after an extended wait—that is good news. However, there is the plight of those who are still in hotels waiting for their visas, particularly the relatives of people who assisted holocaust survivors in escaping the Nazis. Will my hon. Friend prioritise those people? We owe them a big debt of gratitude for the risks that they undertook.

Kevin Foster: I am very happy to look at individual cases or instances that my hon. Friend wishes to supply. I am sure that, like me, he found that one of the most tragic moments of the current war was when a holocaust survivor was killed by Russian shelling. Having survived so much horror in the earlier parts of his life, he lost it in the latest horror to be inflicted by a tyrant looking to dominate his neighbours.

Certainly, there has been a big step up in the number of visas being issued each day. As I say, nearly 90,000 have now been issued, and we are very much looking forward to welcoming those we are granting visas to. I am pleased to hear that the case that my hon. Friend had planned to raise has now been resolved.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): People who should be eligible under the family scheme criteria are being told that their applications are taking longer because their family link is not close enough. Can the Minister tell us whether applications are being prioritised based on how immediate a family link is, and if so, why?

Kevin Foster: The simple answer is no. They will usually be done in date order, unless there are particular compelling and compassionate circumstances. Given the nature of the situation that people have left in Ukraine and eastern Poland, in many ways virtually all applications have compelling and compassionate circumstances. We do not order applications based on how close a relative they are. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the list of relatives we will accept is quite extensive. In addition, if someone was for example a godparent, that would not qualify under the family scheme, but we would look to see whether it could be transferred into the Homes for Ukraine scheme and whether the person concerned could act as a sponsor for the individual instead.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): After what happened in Salisbury, I urge my hon. Friend not to take the rather reckless advice of the SNP. Due to the fog of war, there undoubtedly—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) is trying to intervene on me, but he is reckless in his suggestion, and after Salisbury—[*Interruption.*].

Mr Speaker: Order. Just a moment. Let us hear—[*Interruption.*] Order. Mr McDonald, you will be wanting to catch my eye in a second, and the best thing to do is to hold your breath until then.

Michael Fabricant: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Undoubtedly, due to the fog of war, there were long delays, and still are in some instances. However, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to thank the people in the Home Office who have been working very hard of late. The Lichfield constituents are very generous and want to house Ukrainians. I and my staff have been dealing with numerous cases, most of which are now resolved. I thank the people of Lichfield and I thank particularly Home Office officials, who have been working almost a 24-hour day to resolve this.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments; I know the team who have been working on these schemes will very much appreciate what he has just said. As we have touched on several times, nearly 90,000 visas have now been issued and we are seeing significant numbers of people arriving in the UK. That is a tribute not only to the generosity of spirit of people such as those in Lichfield who are looking to host families and provide what support they can, but to those teams that have worked to stand up the scheme. It is worth noting that the British national overseas passports scheme was over about one year and dealt with 100,000 people. This has been 90,000 within a matter of weeks.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I am trying to help a family who fled the Donbas region, where their house was obliterated by the Russians. They have made it to Cherkasy. I submitted an application for mum, but could not submit one for the child because he did not have his passport. They applied for a passport in Ukraine and it was turned around within days. His application for a visa was granted yesterday, on 27 April. I understand that the mother's visa application was granted on 20 April, but that has not been communicated to her because additional checks now have to be carried out. Can the Minister understand the frustration that I feel on behalf of that family, whose visas have been approved but who do not have the letters to travel? Why is it that the Republic of Ireland does not ask people to submit themselves to checks that cause such delays?

Kevin Foster: Certainly, if a visa has been approved, it would be interesting to know what further checks there are. There are local authority checks relating to sponsors and accommodation, but that does not affect the ability to travel. I am happy to look at the example if the hon. Gentleman will supply it to me. The Republic of Ireland has taken a view based on its own position and in the light of its own situation. The commentary coming out of Moscow about the United Kingdom is very different from that about a number of other countries. The Republic of Ireland has made its choice and we have engaged with it closely on what it has decided to do, but we have made an assessment based on our own advice and needs. I understand, of course, that the Labour party has already said it supports having a visa and has not, unlike the SNP, called for the visas to be abandoned.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): A lady sponsored by one of my constituents waited so long for her visa that organised criminals offered her a counterfeit visa in return for favours. We have a 10-year-old who is the only member of her family not to have been given permission to travel yet. Thankfully, my vulnerable lady is now sorted out, but the other family member is still

waiting to hear about further progress. Does the Minister agree that this process must be improved, and improved urgently, because these are vulnerable people and we have a duty to keep them safe?

Kevin Foster: It is concerning to hear of any attempt to take advantage of a vulnerable person. If the evidence has not already been supplied to us and to the Polish authorities, we would certainly be grateful for it so that we can track down those involved in offering counterfeit documents. I would make it very clear that counterfeit documents do not work for travel.

On the 10-year-old concerned, again, if there is a particular case still outstanding, I am happy to look at it. We are rapidly getting through the remaining outstanding cases. I said when I appeared at the Dispatch Box a few weeks back that we would see a rapid increase in the rate of visa grants. As colleagues will have seen from the published statistics, we have seen a very significant increase in the rate of grants over the last couple of weeks, and that is continuing. We are looking to move to a frictionless level of claims going through the process without any delay in the very near future, and the teams are certainly working very hard to achieve that.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): As we have heard from around the Chamber, there are many cases of families waiting for documents for their children, particularly for the form for affixing the visa, despite mothers already having had a visa granted. I understand that these FAVs actually need to be printed in the UK and then couriered over to whichever country, which is sometimes taking many days. I think this situation is really quite shameful. In the one case I want to cite, the person applied back on 24 March and their biometrics were submitted on 31 March, but they have no accommodation and they have run out of money. I am sure that many Members across the House have lots of other cases like that. Can we not just waive the visa demand for these children?

Kevin Foster: I have already outlined why we have the visa requirement, although in the case of children, that is more focused on safeguarding the children. There is a real issue, particularly if unaccompanied minors leave Poland and the other border countries. Again in relation to unaccompanied minors, as I have stated at the Dispatch Box on previous occasions, the Ukrainian Government have a strong policy position on unaccompanied children who are travelling being placed into the care of foreigners without their consent. The visa process is about that, but even then, for actual travel to the United Kingdom people do need documents to be able to board planes. In some cases, if they do not have a passport or any other document, it is the FAV with the vignette on it that actually gives them the ability to board a plane.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Those seeking visas are turning to social media to try to identify sponsors, and this is leaving many refugees, mainly women and children, vulnerable to potential sexual exploitation. The Scottish Government are carrying out protecting vulnerable group checks. Can the Minister detail the initial safeguarding and ongoing follow-ups that will be done with host families and, indeed, the refugees who are staying with them?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Member for her question. Certainly, we would point people towards some of the more recognised charities that are offering matching services, rather than just going on to social media. It was particularly concerning—this has now been rectified following, I believe, an intervention—that at one point a popular search engine put a dating site near the top when people were searching for matching with a refugee. That was clearly an utterly inappropriate site to have as one of the things being suggested.

On the ongoing safeguarding checks, I hope the hon. Member appreciates why I will not go into the exact details of the databases and information we look at for the visa application. However, once people have arrived, councils in England are doing Disclosure and Barring Service checks, with enhanced checks if a child will be staying with the sponsor—I understand that councils in Scotland are doing similar checks—and then there is a requirement for ongoing checks. The £10,500 funding per person is partly there to help support the required ongoing safeguarding work, particularly where there are children or vulnerable women. One of the benefits of our system is that we know where people are, we know who they are staying with and—we have already done this under our system and it would not happen if we did not have a visa process—we have been able to block people from being placed with those who have committed quite serious offences.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): In Norwich, I have 20 constituents in touch with me who are trying to get the Ukrainian families they have offered homes to into the country. Many of the people applying for visas have had emails about other visa seekers coming back to them in the confusion. We have an urgent visa processing and help system for MPs that is nothing but urgent: it takes days of prompting to get anything back. Having listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) talk about the whistleblowers, I guess the question is: is it cock-up or is it conspiracy, or have the Government cocked up their conspiracy to cock up?

Kevin Foster: As I said, we have already issued nearly 90,000 visas. We are working hard each day to increase that number, and that will remain our focus.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Following on from the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), we too in Newport East have cases where only one family member has had a visa—in one case, a six-year-old, more than a month since the entire family application went in. The kind people of Newport East have been very generous in opening their homes and their hearts, but what does the Minister suggest that we say to these families, who, as we have heard, are fast running out of money?

Kevin Foster: We can say to those families that we are fast getting through the applications. As I say, nearly 90,000 visas have been granted and we are seeing thousands more granted every day.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Although the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) has beetled out of the Chamber, let me

remind the House that the Salisbury attack was carried out by Russian FSB agents, not Ukrainian refugees; to conflate the two was wildly inappropriate.

I want to ask about support for the Government of Poland. I visited there recently with the Foreign Affairs Committee, and it is clear that the Poles are carrying an enormous burden in comparison even with other bordering countries. They need logistical help with the burden that they are shouldering, which is understandable given their geographical location. Will the Minister update the House on some of the Government-to-Government work between London and Warsaw to ensure that they are getting all the support they need?

Kevin Foster: As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, the Polish Government and Polish people are doing amazing work in supporting those who have crossed the border from Ukraine. We have provided £30 million to Poland to help with providing temporary shelter, education and other basic services. We have also provided things like blankets and hydro kits to Moldova, which, as he will know, is similarly seeing significant pressures in terms of those who have crossed the border. As part of a wider package, we have had on the ground UK teams from the Home Office who have been supporting people at our visa application centres. A range of support is being given. I recently met the Visegrád Group ambassadors to talk about what they were seeing in terms of giving support and what lessons had been learned about how we can provide more. That support will need to continue. Of course we all hope that in the near future Putin's forces will be defeated and that the next thing we can do is to support people to return home.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In 2019 the all-party parliamentary group on Africa, which I chair, published a detailed and damning report on the visa application centres. Many of the points we made on outsourcing, TLScontact, digitalisation, scanning, data reconciliation, training and resourcing have clearly not been addressed, and now Ukrainians fleeing war and my constituents who want to help them—I have many such constituents—are paying the price. Exactly how will the Minister ensure that visa processing is immediately speeded up? Given that he will not reduce the requirements of the process, as Labour has been calling for, can he confirm that that means that visa applicants from other places in the world will see further delays?

Kevin Foster: In terms of the future of visa application centres and the report published three years ago, the hon. Member is welcome to read some of the documentation we have put out about the changes as part of the future border and immigration system to significantly reduce the number of people who have to use a visa application centre, with many more either using biometrics or being able to make their applications fully online rather than having to go to a centre. We have already significantly speeded up the granting of visas under the two schemes relating to Ukraine, with just under 90,000 having been issued and more being issued every day. In the long term, our vision is to move away from visa application centres being the main place where people make their application, as already shown by what has happened with the biometric bypass route—the vast majority of applications are now being made via that rather than at an application centre.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On Monday, I asked the Home Secretary about Lord Harrington's remarks that it was "in train" that there would be a Ukrainian language drop-down arrow available on the application form. When I asked the Home Secretary whether it was the Government's policy not to have the form translated into Ukrainian, she said,

"I am very happy to pick the matter up directly with the hon. Gentleman."—[*Official Report*, 25 April 2022; Vol. 712, c. 457.]

Can I make it clear that I do not want Ministers to pick up directly with me? I want them to answer straightforward factual questions here on the Floor of the House on the record, as required by the ministerial code. Can the Minister tell me whether it is the Government's policy not to provide Ukrainian translation of the form?

Kevin Foster: We have already done step-by-step guidance for the form in both Ukrainian and Russian, which makes it much simpler to follow. One of the issues with translating the form into other languages is that it means we would need to have decision makers who can speak the particular language. We are clear that sponsors and others can assist with filling in the form to make for a better experience for those needing to apply. As already shown, we have now granted nearly 90,000 visas, which speaks for itself and the performance that is being achieved.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I understand the pressure that officials are working under, but visa application centres are giving conflicting advice to applicants and to my constituents who are part of the Homes for Ukraine scheme. In one instance, we were told that a child's visa was granted and that travel documents should be with them within a couple of days, and then that the child's mother had been phoned by mistake, as it was in fact someone else's visa that had been granted and it would take around another two weeks for the right visa to come through. These folk are in effect homeless, and time is of the essence. In another case, a constituent's fiancé and daughter were told that a decision had been made on 13 April, but two weeks later, they still have not been told to go and collect the documents. A mother and two daughters are still trapped in Ukraine, 22 days since applications were submitted. As my constituent who would like to host those three when they finally arrive says, each day the message that they are welcome in the UK fades a little more. Those are just a few of the cases that my team and I are dealing with at the moment. The Minister offered to look at a colleague's case. Will he be prepared to take a look at these cases when I send them through to him?

Kevin Foster: Yes, I am very happy to look at them. If incorrect or confusing advice is being given by a visa application centre, we certainly want the details of that so that we can intervene and engage to ensure the centre is fully conversant with what it should be doing and how the process should work. For example, we have made clear with carriers that if people have a form for affixing the vignette, they do not also need permission to travel letters. That was one issue we encountered. We made clear that the form is their permission to travel once they have it. I am very happy to look at individual cases if forwarded to me.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I applaud the generosity of my constituents who have offered their homes to Ukrainian refugees, but many are growing frustrated, anxious and despondent because of the continual delays they are experiencing, which I am sure the Minister has heard about many times already. One example is a sponsored woman sheltering in a school in Lviv. After a month, she finally had her visa approved this week, but that is yet to be communicated to her, and neither has the permission to travel been issued. As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) indicated earlier, this pattern is being repeated up and down the country. Can we have some assurances that that individual will not have to wait another month for those things to happen as well?

Kevin Foster: Absolutely. It should not take that long. We are also clear that people are welcome to travel into a third country, if they can. They do not need to wait in Ukraine for the decision or the paperwork to be granted. Of course, there has been no direct travel between the UK and Ukraine since the Russian attack. Those documents should be issued fairly promptly after the process. As has been touched on, the process that will shortly come on to the fully online system automates much of that and makes it even quicker than the current process.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): A female constituent is sponsoring a young woman who is just 18 and on her own. It took over five weeks for the visa to come through and there is still paperwork that needs to be finalised. That vulnerable young woman is still without protection. Is the Minister not worried that the long delays will increase the risk of trafficking? Is it not an irony that the checks are being done for security reasons, but the Government are facilitating criminality?

Kevin Foster: The checks are being done for safeguarding reasons as well, as I have already touched on during this urgent question. We have already blocked some instances where a potential sponsor had serious criminal convictions, which would mean that it would be wholly unsuitable for a vulnerable person to stay with them. We are conscious that we want to take advantage of the great generosity that many people have shown, which is why we have now granted nearly 90,000 visas. We are granting thousands more every day, and we look forward to seeing more people being able to come and take up the offers of sanctuary that people are making.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, want to raise the issue of the bureaucracy that is putting women and children at risk. Why is the UK such an outlier when it comes to that? Ensuring that people have safe and expedient travel, and that they are not online trying to find a route to the UK, is important. Will the Minister speed up his processes and consider people being able to collect their visas in the UK rather than having to wait in other countries?

Kevin Foster: Of course, people who come under the permission to travel system print out the email and show it alongside their passport. In terms of travelling to the UK, for the cohort that does still need to go to a visa application centre and get a vignette, that is the document and ID that will enable them to get on a plane. Far from being an outlier, I point to other similar

nations with similar systems, such as Canada, the USA and Australia, which have gone down a similar path in terms of looking to have a visa system—a humanitarian visa system—as we have.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): The Minister highlighted what an outstanding job the Government of Poland in Warsaw are doing. I wonder if he is at all concerned that they are almost certainly not saying the same about the Government of the United Kingdom in Westminster when it comes to supporting Ukrainian refugees, given that refugees on their way here are labouring under a pedestrian, grudging bureaucracy that is almost certainly predicated on allowing the minimum amount of refugees over the maximum period of time.

My constituent Moira Ross is trying to get to safety in Angus a woman who left Ukraine pregnant and has now had a child in Italy, but the woman has to wait for a form for affixing a visa for her baby and her husband, which will take another five weeks, and the visa application centre is five hours' travel from where they are living. Does the Minister believe that five weeks or 10 hours in a car are acceptable?

Kevin Foster: I am certainly happy to look at the individual case if the hon. Gentleman supplies the details. In terms of the message from Poland, I and others have had great engagement with the Polish Government. The Polish people are pleased with the way that the UK is standing with them. They are a NATO ally, and we are clear about the support that we will provide in relation to any threats being made towards them. Certainly, across the world and in Ukraine, the hon. Gentleman may wish to take a gander at the views that people have of the support given by the UK Government. Certainly, there is a positive view of the UK at this time.

Mr Speaker: That ends the urgent question.

Points of Order

11.13 am

Mr Speaker: There are quite a few points of order. Of course, I must start, rightly, with the Father of the House, Sir Peter Bottomley.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am happy to come first and last, because I have a second one on column 799 from yesterday about the Electoral Commission.

My first one is about Prorogation and a written statement that the Government said that they will make about the future of broadcasting. I checked three minutes ago and it has not been received in the Table Office. Can written statements still be made during Prorogation or is there some way to ensure that the Government get the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to put that statement into the hands of Members of Parliament before Prorogation? My subsidiary question is that the Member Hub website goes down at Prorogation, which is where most MPs would expect to find the statement, so how will we get it?

At present, the Department has issued a press notice to give its take on what is in the statement. In column 798 yesterday, I asked whether we could have an oral statement. The Government have not complied with that and they have not complied with their intention to publish a written statement. Mr Speaker, I would be grateful if you could guide the House and the Department on how we can now proceed.

Mr Speaker: I was surprised that nobody put in for an urgent question this morning on this issue following the news today, just as a way of having a holding platform. I am disappointed, but I want to think about my answer and would prefer to try to offer a way forward when the hon. Gentleman comes back with his final point of order at the end.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We will work our way through the points of order, starting on the Opposition Front Bench.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, and on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeter), who has now miraculously appeared. Yesterday during Prime Minister's questions the Prime Minister responded to the High Court ruling that found the Government broke the law in discharging patients to care homes without testing them for covid first in 2020, saying that "the thing we did not know in particular was that covid could be transmitted asymptotically".—[*Official Report*, 27 April 2022; Vol. 712, c. 762.]

I am afraid that I believe the Prime Minister may have inadvertently misled the House, because on 28 January 2020 advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies—I have checked—on asymptomatic transmission included that

"early indications imply some is occurring."

On 24 February *The Lancet*—again I have checked—published a paper which stated that

[Thangam Debbonaire]

“infected individuals can be infectious before they become symptomatic”,

and on 13 March the chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, told the “Today” programme that

“it’s quite likely that there is some degree of symptomatic transmission.”

Yet it was not until 15 April that the Government guidance was changed to require patients to be tested before being discharged to care homes. That appears to us to contradict what the Prime Minister said yesterday. I am sure that is inadvertent, but can you, Mr Speaker, advise me on how we can best ensure the Prime Minister returns to the House and corrects the record?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving notice of her point of order. As has often been said before, it is vital that statements made in the House are accurate; however, the Chair is not responsible for the contents of a Minister’s speech. What I would say is that I am sure nobody would want to leave an inaccuracy, and I would have thought they would wish to correct the record so that it is not left in abeyance. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the hon. Member’s point of order and a correction will be forthcoming if one is needed; I would think it is better for the House to have accurate information, so let’s see what we can do.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, in evidence to the Select Committee on Science and Technology, the chair of the Government’s Social Mobility Commission said that

“physics isn’t something that girls tend to fancy. They don’t want to do it, they don’t like it...I just think they don’t like it. There’s a lot of hard maths...The research generally...just says that’s a natural thing”.

She said she was

“certainly not out there campaigning”

for more girls to do physics, adding:

“I don’t mind that there’s only 16%”.

That contradicts the lived experience of many girls and women who love maths, such as myself, and research from many organisations and institutions such as the Institute of Physics, the all-party group on diversity and inclusion in science, technology, engineering and maths, which I chair, and, most importantly, the Government’s own stated policy on encouraging girls in STEM. Can you, Mr Speaker, advise me: given that we are proroguing today I cannot lay any written questions, so how can I ascertain whether the Government have changed their policy on encouraging girls into STEM?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order. On the very last day of a Session she has very few options, as she notes, but I am sure her words will not go unnoticed and, once again, those on the Treasury Bench will be listening and I hope it can be taken on board, and I am sure some communication can be made to her.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As we are short of time in this Session, can we put it on the record that physics is something that girls tend to fancy, that they

do want to do it, that they do like it, that they enjoy and excel at the maths in it and that the House supports their options?

Mr Speaker: That is obviously not a point of order, but it is certainly a point well made. My daughter, who is a physics teacher, would be proud.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Before we prorogue, is there some way in which I can get Ministers to pass my sincere thanks to the Secretary of State for Transport for grasping the issue of saving High Wycombe driving test centre for, I think, the second time in a year? Further to that, may we confer to the Driving and Vehicle Standards Agency that driving instructors in Wycombe stand ready and are brimming with ideas and enthusiasm to help it in getting done what the Secretary of State would like: to find a permanent place for that test centre?

Mr Speaker: I think that the hon. Member has achieved his objective. What more can I say?

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given Prorogation, can you advise me on how I might raise the urgent matter of the fifth successive Care Quality Commission warning notice for mental health services in my constituency and beyond in Norfolk and Suffolk? Those failings, driven by cuts and successive failures of leadership, have led to deaths, suffering and tragedy for more than a decade. How can I make it clear to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care that enough is enough and that he must take direct control of this failing service, provide it with emergency funding and rebuild it from the bottom up with its patients and hard-working and dedicated staff?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving me notice of his point of order. It is not a procedural matter requiring an immediate ruling from the Chair. The Table Office can advise hon. Members on how to raise matters that are of great concern to their constituents. The hon. Member made his point forcefully, and I am sure that people will have heard a clear message.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As a relatively new Member of the House with just 20 years’ experience, may I ask you to give me some procedural advice? Is there any procedure by which I can inform the House that my constituent Luke Symons, who was incarcerated for five years in Sanaa in Yemen and whose case I have raised many times on the Floor of the House, was released this week and is back, safe and well with his wife and child in my constituency? Further, is there any mechanism by which I can put on the record my thanks to all Members of the House who over the years have expressed support for Luke and his family, as well as to his grandfather Bob Cummings, who campaigned tirelessly for his release?

Mr Speaker: Once again, the hon. Member has achieved his objective—it is certainly on the record—and the whole House supports the release of his constituent.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You and hon. Members will know that, yesterday, the Government of the Russian Federation sanctioned a number of Members of this House—including yourself—but the list also included individuals who are no longer Members of the House. May I suggest that you write to your counterpart in the Russian state Duma to give them a list of current Members of Parliament? Some of us would very much like to have the badge of honour of being sanctioned by the Russian state.

Mr Speaker: It is a very interesting idea. I think I ought to write to the Speaker and explain that while they there may not have the same democratic feel that we have, our Members are elected, and some have been missed off a list that some feel is a badge of honour. None more so than the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who, after all the hard work he has done, was really uptight that he had not achieved what others had been granted without any effort whatsoever. I thank the hon. Member for that point.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Point of order, Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. You are always most kind, and I appreciate it.

Over the last few weeks, Members have put in a number of questions. We know that those questions will fall if they have not been answered. In the last few days, I have asked questions on Ukraine and health—issues of critical importance to my constituents. How can Members ensure we get the answers to the questions we have asked but which have not yet been responded to? Do we submit them again, or do we remind Departments of the importance of those questions and seek a response?

Mr Speaker: First, I thank the hon. Member for his contribution over this Session. It has been greater than everybody else's. As ever, he is quite right to raise this important point today. I take on board what he has said, and I thank him for it.

Sir Peter Bottomley *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Sir Peter, shall we deal with your earlier point of order first? It is very interesting. Yes, we can have a written statement up to Prorogation—that is still possible. There is another possibility, but I think it would be totally unfair to the Whip if I were to grant an urgent question now on the basis of what you have asked. [HON. MEMBERS: "Go on!"]

Sir Peter Bottomley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I put it to you that the House should have an urgent opportunity to debate the missing written statement or oral statement on the future of broadcasting, which was referred to yesterday by a Minister, when the House was assured there would be a statement? The question was raised whether it could be oral or written. We have had neither. May I put it to you, Mr Speaker, that this matter should be put before the House as a matter of urgency?

Mr Speaker: I appeal to the Government Front Bench to see if we can find the written statement so it can be available for Members. I have a lot of sympathy for such a point, especially when it is from the Father of the House. It matters when any Back Bencher raises such a matter, but the Father of the House makes a very serious point: promises were made and they have not been carried out. It would be unfair to grant an emergency urgency question—I would not want to do that—but I believe there is still time for people to come forward with an oral statement. It would certainly be very helpful if the written statement could be found, wherever it is lost and whatever we have to do to find it. Someone ought to be scurrying around to try to find it. The Government have until 12.20 pm. So, who knows, it may be at the Dispatch Box, or it may be that we find the missing statement that could be circulating somewhere.

Sir Peter Bottomley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If it is convenient to the House, I withdraw my previous motion to you.

The point I want to raise now involves your role, Mr Speaker, in connection with the Electoral Commission, and it follows the point of order I raised yesterday in column 799 of the *Official Report*. We know that matters of election spending, and reporting that spending, can be complicated, as illustrated in the Thanet case when the Court of Appeal unanimously said it was not legal to report an expense both nationally and locally. The Supreme Court shortly afterwards decided unanimously that the Court of Appeal was wrong. If distinguished Court of Appeal judges can be wrong, so can others.

The reason I raise this point is that the Labour party has done two things, one to which I do not object, which is filling the pages of the *Worthing Herald* to encourage people to vote Labour. That is my local newspaper, and we are very grateful for that. I am not sure how much good it will do the Labour party to show that it has more money than sense.

The point that does matter is the issue I raised yesterday, whereby a letter from the leader of the Labour party to a named elector at a specified address asked them to vote Labour on 5 May. I have had informal discussions with the Electoral Commission. I do not want to go into the details of those discussions, because they were informal. One view is that this is national spending. In court, I think that would be challenged because there are no national elections on 5 May, only local elections.

The second view is that the only candidate for whom an elector could vote in that ward would be the Labour candidate. The question then arises of how that expense will be accounted for in the return. It might be a national return, except that there are not national returns for local elections, or the local agent for the candidate could include it, even as a nominal sum, in their own return. Were that to be challenged, if the return was thought to be inaccurate or incomplete, a complaint would then need to be made to the police. A complaint is not made to the Electoral Commission; it is made to the police.

The House will now rise until after the local elections. The police would not be involved in a formal complaint until after the electoral expenses return had been made,

[Sir Peter Bottomley]

30 or 35 days after election day. How would the police be put on notice to check nationally—which is where the spending is supposed to be—and locally, where I believe it should be recorded, at least as a nominal expense, so that they could preserve the evidence if there was a challenge at the end of the process? I know that this would need to be determined by a court, but the issue of where the evidence would come from and the necessity of the police to be alert has to be dealt with now.

Mr Speaker: We had questions to the Electoral Commission representative earlier, so it might have been possible to mention that then, but the Father of the House raises a very important issue. Mail is sent to named individuals by different leaders and all parties, so this is about not just one, but many parties. It is not a matter for the Chair, but I take seriously the consequences, implications and possible rulings that would come on the back of this.

The Father of the House said that he contacted the Electoral Commission. I am sure that it will come forward with its view and opinion, and quite rightly, this could end up being a judicial matter. I will also put this on the record during my meeting with the Electoral Commission, but I stress that leaders of all parties send out direct correspondence by name. I can guarantee that the signatures will not be handwritten, because they are a national way of corresponding.

We will leave it at that for today. I know that the Father of the House would not want me to be drawn on something that is not actually a matter for the Chair, but I take seriously the implications that could follow, depending on what the decision would be.

We still have chance for a statement—who knows? However, I suspend the sitting, and shortly before the sitting is resumed, I shall cause the Division bells to be sounded to indicate that the House is back.

11.31 am

Sitting suspended (Order, 26 April).

MESSAGE TO ATTEND THE LORDS COMMISSIONERS

12.28 pm

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners delivered by the Lady Usher of the Black Rod.

The Speaker, with the House, went up to hear Her Majesty's Commission; on their return, the Speaker sat in the Clerk's place at the Table.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to acquaint the House that the House has been to the House of Peers where a Commission under the Great Seal was read, authorising the Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Local Government (Disqualification) Act 2022
 Down Syndrome Act 2022
 Animals (Penalty Notices) Act 2022
 Professional Qualifications Act 2022
 Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022
 Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022
 Subsidy Control Act 2022
 Cultural Objects (Protection from Seizure) Act 2022
 Motor Vehicles (Compulsory Insurance) Act 2022
 Glue Traps (Offences) Act 2022
 Approved Premises (Substance Testing) Act 2022
 Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022
 Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Disabled Persons) Act 2022
 Building Safety Act 2022
 Health and Care Act 2022
 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022
 Pension Schemes (Conversion of Guaranteed Minimum Pensions) Act 2022
 British Sign Language Act 2022
 Judicial Review and Courts Act 2022
 Nationality and Borders Act 2022
 Elections Act 2022
 Monken Hadley Common Act 2022.

Her Majesty's Most Gracious Speech

Mr Speaker: I have further to acquaint the House that the Leader of the House of Lords, one of the Lords Commissioners, delivered Her Majesty's Most Gracious Speech to both Houses of Parliament, in pursuance of Her Majesty's Command. For greater accuracy I have obtained a copy, and also directed that the terms of the speech be printed in the *Journal* of this House. Copies are being made available in the Vote Office.

The Speech was as follows:

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

My Government has acted to address the unprecedented issues the United Kingdom has faced, from the global pandemic to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As the nation has recovered from COVID-19, my Ministers have taken action to build a strong and prosperous United Kingdom. My Government has continued to address the impact of the pandemic on business and the NHS and to level up opportunities, jobs and growth across the country. My Ministers also worked with international partners to protect and promote freedom and democracy across the globe.

My Ministers continued to implement the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. My Government invested further in our gallant Armed Forces, spending more money last year than in any of the past thirty years. It has also worked with international partners to support the people of Ukraine and respond to the crisis. Legislation was passed to tackle economic crime and ensure transparency in property ownership. My Ministers also ensured that punitive sanctions were imposed on individuals and organisations undermining the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

My Government has taken forward a programme of modernisation for the Armed Forces and reinforced the United Kingdom's commitment to NATO. My Ministers honoured and strengthened the Armed Forces Covenant, placing it in law. Measures were introduced to provide relief from National Insurance contributions for employers of veterans.

My Government took action to protect the health of the nation. The vaccination programme delivered over 140 million doses and additional funding was provided to support the NHS. Legislation was passed to empower the NHS to innovate and reduce bureaucracy. As a result, patients will receive more tailored care, closer to home. My Ministers set out proposals to secure the long term funding of adult social care.

Building on the success of the vaccination programme and new ways of funding research and innovation, my Ministers oversaw the fastest ever increase in public funding for research and development. This will support pioneering new treatments against diseases such as cancer and secure jobs and investment across the country.

My Government introduced measures to increase the safety and security of its citizens.

Legislation strengthened police powers to tackle crime and disorder, increased sentences for the most serious and violent offenders and ensured the timely administration of justice. Measures were passed to establish an immigration system that strengthens the United Kingdom's borders and deters criminals who facilitate dangerous and illegal journeys.

My Government introduced legislation that will ensure internet safety for all, especially for children, while harnessing the benefits of a free, open and secure internet. Legislation was passed to better protect digital infrastructure.

My Government invested in new green industries to create jobs, while protecting the environment. The United Kingdom hosted the COP26 Summit in Glasgow. Legislation was passed that will set binding environmental targets.

My Government strengthened economic ties across the union. My Ministers invested in improvements to national infrastructure and brought forward measures to strengthen connectivity by rail. Measures to extend mobile coverage and gigabit capable broadband were introduced.

Legislation was passed to encourage investment and competition across the United Kingdom and drive economic growth. Legislation established a new approach to the recognition of professional qualifications, supporting international trade. My Government has created new freeports, which will drive regeneration by bringing investment, trade and jobs. My Ministers delivered legislation to increase the National Insurance starting thresholds, benefitting almost thirty million people.

My Government took action to address lost learning during the pandemic and ensure every child has a high quality education. Legislation was passed to support a lifetime skills guarantee to enable flexible access to high quality education and training throughout people's lives.

My Government helped more people to achieve home ownership. The practice of charging ground rents was ended for most new leasehold properties. My Ministers delivered legislation to ensure that the tragedies of the past are never repeated by establishing in law a new Building Safety Regulator.

My Government reduced bureaucracy for the voluntary sector, enabling charities to focus on their core work. Legislation was passed to ensure that more dormant assets can be released, so funds can help those in need.

My Government strengthened and renewed democracy and the constitution. Legislation was passed to ensure the integrity of elections and restore the balance of power between the executive, legislature and the courts. Measures were brought forward to protect the freedom of speech in higher education. My Ministers promoted the strength and integrity of the union. Laws were passed to strengthen the devolved Government in Northern Ireland.

The United Kingdom hosted the G7 Summit and supported the global effort to secure a robust economic recovery from the pandemic. My Government has committed £1.4 billion of aid to the international effort to tackle the pandemic. My Ministers deepened trade ties around the world, beginning negotiations on trade deals with India and Canada, and negotiations to accede to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

My Government continued to provide aid where it had the greatest impact on alleviating human suffering, promoting global prosperity, and upholding human rights and democracy. While holding the Presidency of the G7, my Ministers led a global effort to get forty million more girls across the world into school and twenty million more girls reading by 2026. The United Kingdom has supported countries globally to provide clean and reliable infrastructure through British Investment Partnerships, helping countries to build back after the challenges in recent years.

Members of the House of Commons

I thank you for the provisions which you have made for the work and dignity of the Crown and for the public services.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels.

PROROGATION

Mr Speaker: The Commission was also for proroguing this present Parliament, and the Leader of the House of Lords said:

“My Lords and Members of the House of Commons:

By virtue of Her Majesty's Commission which has been now read, we do, in Her Majesty's name, and in obedience to Her Majesty's Commands, prorogue this Parliament to Tuesday the tenth day of May, to be then here holden, and this Parliament is accordingly prorogued to Tuesday the tenth day of May.”

End of the Second Session (opened on 11 May 2021) of the Fifty-Eighth Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the Seventy-First Year of the Reign of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second.

Written Statements

Thursday 28 April 2022

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Afghanistan: Humanitarian Situation

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): My noble Friend, the Minister for South and Central Asia, North Africa, United Nations and the Commonwealth (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon), has made the following written ministerial statement:

Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis remains severe. This is despite the massive response mounted since August 2021 preventing the UN and aid agencies' worst fears from being realised over the winter. Afghanistan faces acute hunger, over 6 million people have been internally displaced and millions of children are out of school. The UK continues to be at the forefront of the humanitarian response in Afghanistan. It remains a priority for the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and Ministers of State.

We have delivered on the Prime Minister's commitment to double assistance for Afghanistan in 2021-22, delivering humanitarian assistance to over 6.1 million people. Working with aid agencies, we disbursed £286 million, including £17 million for support to Afghan refugees in the region. A full breakdown appears in the annexes attached. All our humanitarian assistance is going to UN agencies and other experienced international partners.

On 11 January 2022, the UN launched an appeal for \$4.4 billion for 2022, the largest humanitarian appeal on record, reflecting the magnitude of the humanitarian challenge ahead. The UK was at the forefront in responding to this and on 31 March, alongside Qatar, Germany, and the UN Office of Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the UK co-hosted the 2022 Afghanistan Pledging Conference, where \$2.4 billion was pledged.

On 30 March, the Foreign Secretary announced the UK pledge of £286 million for 2022-2023, the second highest commitment to the humanitarian response plan for Afghanistan to date. This commitment reflects the UK's enduring commitment to the people of Afghanistan.

HMG officials continue to press the Taliban to respond to international concerns, including the protection of human rights, and especially the rights of women and girls. We regularly make it clear to the Taliban that the provision of humanitarian assistance requires, among other things, a lack of interference with humanitarian operations, unconditional access for female aid workers, and the full access of women and girls to services.

We have also worked with the World Bank, United Nations, and United States of America to find solutions which will allow international NGOs to access currency in Afghanistan. In January we successfully worked with the Asian Development Bank to make \$405 million available and on 1 March the World Bank Board agreed to make the remaining \$1 billion in the Afghanistan reconstruction trust fund available for health, education, livelihoods, and food security.

The UK also played a key role in pressing for a resolution establishing a humanitarian exception under the UN Afghanistan sanctions regime. In line with UN Security Council 2615 the UK has passed legislation to provide an exception from the assets freeze against listed members of the Taliban solely for the provision of humanitarian assistance and other activities to support basic needs. This will save lives and reduce the impediments faced by humanitarian agencies in reaching those most in need.

On 17 March, the UK supported a UNSC resolution renewing the mandate of the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). This provided UNAMA with a robust and flexible

mandate to facilitate humanitarian aid delivery, engagement with the Taliban, human rights monitoring and reporting, and a strengthened focus on gender mainstreaming throughout UN activities.

In addition to providing humanitarian assistance, we are also looking to the medium and longer term. The provision of basic services, such as health, education and livelihoods, remains critical to prevent a worsening of the humanitarian crisis. We continue to explore solutions for their delivery and support payment of front-line delivery workers, with support to any service predicated on access to that service by all.

The Foreign Secretary committed to putting women and girls at the heart of the UK's response to Afghanistan. The Taliban have imposed unacceptable restrictions on women's ability to move around freely, to work, and to access education. Despite statements that schools would open for all students, the Taliban rescinded this commitment and announced on 23 March that all girls' schools from 6th grade upwards will remain closed until further notice. The UK, alongside international partners, have called on them to reverse this decision.

There are increasing restrictions on freedom of expression including media censorship and harassment of journalists. Members of religious and ethnic minority groups and LGBT+ continue to be attacked and to suffer discrimination. We are working with aid agencies to prioritise those most at risk, including households headed by women and people with disabilities, and ensure that marginalised groups have equal, safe and dignified access to assistance and services.

Ministers and officials continue to engage with a wide range of Afghans, including representatives from civil society, religious and ethnic minorities and women activists. Lord Ahmad regularly meets with prominent Afghan women to hear their concerns and consult on the UK's approach to Afghanistan, most recently on 24 March when he held a roundtable event with Afghan female leaders.

There is regular parliamentary engagement on the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, including the recent meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Afghanistan on 21 March. Lord Ahmad briefed Parliamentarians ahead of the UN Afghanistan Pledging Conference on 22 March.

The attachment "Afghanistan - Humanitarian Situation" pdf can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-04-28/HCWS799/>.

[HCWS799]

Provisional Statistics on International Development: 2021

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): "Statistics on International Development: Provisional UK Aid Spend 2021" was published on 12 April. This set out that the UK spent almost £11.5 billion on official development assistance (ODA) in 2021, representing 0.5% of gross national income (GNI).

In November 2020, my right hon. Friend the former Foreign Secretary confirmed to the House that the UK would temporarily reduce the aid budget from 0.7% of GNI to 0.5%, as a result of the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on the UK's economy. The Government intend to return to spending 0.7% of GNI on ODA as soon as the fiscal situation allows: when on a sustainable basis the Government are not borrowing for day-to-day spending and underlying debt is falling. On 13 July 2021, the Government gave Members of Parliament the opportunity to debate their proposed course of action and a pathway back to 0.7%. The House voted clearly to approve the approach set out in the Treasury's written ministerial statement.

The publication of the report is the first official release confirming the UK has not met the target of spending 0.7% of GNI on ODA as required by the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015. That Act requires the Secretary of State to lay a statement before Parliament if the 0.7% target is not met explaining why it has not been met, as soon as reasonably practicable after laying the FCDO's annual report and accounts (see section 2(1) and 2(3) of the 2015 Act).

The FCDO's annual report and accounts will be laid before the summer recess.

[HCWS795]

CABINET OFFICE

Brexit Opportunities

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): When the UK left the European Union, we regained the right to manage our own borders in a way that works for Britain. This includes how we manage imports into our country from overseas. British businesses and people going about their daily lives are being hit by rising costs caused by Russia's war in Ukraine and in energy prices. It would therefore be wrong to impose new administrative burdens and risk disruption at ports and to supply chains at this point. The remaining import controls on EU goods will no longer be introduced this year, saving British businesses up to £1 billion in annual costs.

Instead the Government are accelerating our transformative programme to digitise Britain's borders, harnessing new technologies and data to reduce friction and costs for businesses and consumers. This is a new approach for a new era, as Britain maximises the benefits of leaving the EU and puts in place the right policies for our trade with the whole world.

Introducing controls in July would have replicated the controls that the EU applies to its global trade. This would have introduced complex and costly checks that would have then been altered later as our transformation programme is delivered. The challenges that this country faces have underlined that this is not the right thing to do for Britain.

No further import controls on EU goods will be introduced this year. Businesses can stop their preparations for July now. We will publish a target operating model in the autumn that will set out our new regime of border import controls and will target the end of 2023 as the revised introduction date for our controls regime, which will deliver on our promise to create the world's best border on our shores.

This new approach will apply equally to goods from the EU and goods from the rest of the world.

It will be based on a proper assessment of risk, with a proportionate, risk-based and technologically advanced approach to controls. This includes the single trade window which will start to deliver from 2023, the creation of an ecosystem of trust between Government and industry, and other transformational projects as part of our 2025 borders strategy.

The controls that have already been introduced will remain in place.

Specifically, the following controls which were planned for introduction from July 2022 will now not be introduced:

A requirement for further Sanitary And Phytosanitary (SPS) checks on EU imports currently at destination to be moved to Border Control Post.

A requirement for safety and security declarations on EU imports.

A requirement for further health certification and SPS checks for EU imports.

Prohibitions and restrictions on the import of chilled meats from the EU.

The border operating model will be updated to reflect this and a copy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses in due course.

[HCWS796]

GOV.UK Verify Sign-up Contract Extension

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I would like to update the House on the gov.uk Verify programme, following the written ministerial statement in April 2021 made by the Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez). As confirmed in the most recent spending review, under the one login for Government programme, the Government are building a single way for citizens to prove their identity and access central Government services online.

While this new product is being developed, we are continuing to support the connected services which rely on gov.uk Verify. As such, we have extended the period in which new users of these services will be able to set up an account until December 2022. Users with an existing account for connected services will be able to continue to use gov.uk Verify until it closes in April 2023.

[HCWS797]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Broadcasting White Paper

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): Our TV and radio industry is the envy of the world. Production studios across the country are booming, and British-made shows like "I May Destroy You" and the "Great British Bake Off" are celebrated all over the globe.

Our public service broadcasters (PSBs) are absolutely central to that success. Sitting at the heart of our broadcasting system, they help to develop skills and talent across the country; they drive growth right across the creative industries; and they deliver distinctive, instantly recognisable British content that you would not find anywhere else.

But broadcasting has changed dramatically over the past few decades. The last time broadcasting regulation was overhauled, in 2003, Netflix was a DVD rental

business. Today, it is one of several American streaming giants offering viewers a daily selection of new content—from Amazon Prime to Disney+ to Hulu to Apple TV and beyond. Viewers increasingly watch programmes on their laptops, phones or smart TVs, choosing what to watch, and when to watch it.

In this new broadcasting world, the competition for audience share is fiercer than ever. In recent years, as streaming services have enjoyed a 19% rise in subscribers, the share of total viewers for “linear” TV channels like the BBC and ITV has fallen by more than 20%.

The Government are focused on ensuring British broadcasters can not only hold their own in this fight, but also flourish in projecting the best of British across the world. Today, I am therefore publishing a White Paper that proposes major reforms to the sector that will update our analogue rules, and enable our broadcasters to thrive in the streaming age.

The White Paper contains a number of key proposals.

First, we want to ensure that in a world of smart TVs and online platforms, our PSBs continue to receive the exposure they deserve. On a traditional TV, our PSBs are given “prominence”: they hold exclusive rights to the first five channels on every television set in the UK. We plan to update those rules for the digital age, by passing legislation that will ensure public service content is always carried and easy to find on all major platforms—including on smart TVs and Fire sticks.

Secondly, while the UK boasts a vibrant and diverse broadcasting system, we need to ensure consumers are protected in this fast changing landscape. We are therefore proposing a new video-on-demand code that will hold streaming services to similar standards as traditional broadcasters like the BBC and ITV—particularly when it comes to protecting audiences from harmful material.

We also plan to overhaul and simplify the complicated public service remit so that our PSBs can focus on the things they do best—such as creating distinctively British programmes and providing impartial and accurate news.

We are also proposing reforms to the listed events regime, so that PSBs have exclusive rights to bid first for the crown jewels of the sporting calendar—including the FIFA World Cup and Wimbledon.

Finally, over the past year we have been carefully considering the future of one broadcaster in particular: Channel 4.

Channel 4 is a key part of our national, economic and cultural life. Since the broadcaster was established in the early 1980s, it has more than fulfilled the original aim for setting it up—shaking up the TV schedules with original, disruptive programming and boosting our independent production sector. In the last few decades, the independent production sector has grown six-fold—from a £500 million industry in 1995 to £3 billion in 2019.

But the broadcasting world around Channel 4 has changed immeasurably during that same period. Like every other broadcaster, it now faces huge competition for audience share—and many of its competitors have incredibly deep pockets. Streamers such as Amazon Prime spent £779 million on UK original productions in 2020—more than twice as much as Channel 4.

In addition, Channel 4 faces a series of unique challenges. Challenges that other public service broadcasters with different ownership models do not face. While other

PSBs such as the BBC and Channel 5 have the freedom to make and sell their own content, Channel 4 has no in-house production studio and its ownership model restricts it from borrowing money or raising private sector capital. It is left almost entirely reliant on advertising revenues. Those revenues were already shifting rapidly online. As seen last week, the competition is only set to heat up now that Netflix has confirmed it intends to enter the advertising market.

It is our view that, under its current form of ownership, Channel 4’s options to grow are currently restricted, with fewer options to invest and compete. Those are serious challenges, and anyone who chooses to dismiss them is burying their head in the sand.

As a responsible Government, we are prepared to acknowledge those challenges head on, and do what is needed to protect one of our most important broadcasters not just today, but in the years to come.

The Government therefore believe it is time to unleash Channel 4’s full potential, and open the broadcaster up to private ownership—while, crucially, protecting its public service broadcasting remit.

The sale of Channel 4 will not just benefit the broadcaster. Channel 4 was originally established to help boost independent production and it has been successful in that mission—so successful in fact, that we face a new and very positive challenge: production studios across the country are booming. They are so in-demand, in fact, that we need more and more people to work in them. I therefore intend to funnel some of the proceeds of the sale of Channel 4 into addressing that new challenge, and giving people up and down the UK the skills and opportunity to fill those jobs—delivering a creative dividend for all.

I want Channel 4’s next chapter to be one in which it goes above and beyond what it has already done regionally, and plays a starring role in levelling up our creative industries.

But the sale of Channel 4 is just one part of a major piece of broadcasting reform. As set out in the White Paper I am publishing today, it is a reflection of the transformation that broadcasting has undergone in the last few years—and the need to make sure that our PSBs can keep pace with those changes.

Our TV and radio industry is already the envy of the world. Today, we are giving British broadcasters the backing and support they need to rule the airwaves for years to come.

In connection with the above, my Department has made the following documents available on gov.uk:

“Up next—the government’s vision for the broadcasting sector”

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/up-next-the-governments-vision-for-the-broadcasting-sector>

“Decision rationale and sale impact analysis for a change of ownership of Channel 4”

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-a-change-of-ownership-of-channel-4-television-corporation/outcome/decision-rationale-and-sale-impact-analysis-for-a-change-of-ownership-of-channel-4>

“Government response to the consultation on a potential change of ownership of Channel 4 Television Corporation”

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-a-change-of-ownership-of-channel-4-television-corporation/outcome/government-response-to-the-consultation-on-a-potential-change-of-ownership-of-channel-4-television-corporation>

“Government response to the consultation on audience protection standards on video-on-demand services”

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/audience-protection-standards-on-video-on-demand-services/outcome/government-response-to-the-consultation-on-audience-protection-standards-on-video-on-demand-services>

“Government response to the Digital Radio and Audio Review”

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-radio-and-audio-review/government-response-to-the-digital-radio-and-audio-review>

I will also deposit copies of these documents in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS802]

Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Covid-19 Emergency

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has today published a report evaluating the impact and delivery of the £750 million of Government funding to support voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations during the covid-19 pandemic. The report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The report can also be found online.

This emergency covid-19 funding package aimed to ensure that the VCSE sector could continue its vital work supporting the country during the coronavirus outbreak, including meeting increased and changing demand due to the pandemic. The package was one of several delivered by DCMS to support sectors through the pandemic, including the culture recovery fund and sport survival package, which have been assessed separately with evaluations to be published in due course.

This funding was disseminated to organisations via various funding streams such as the big night in, the community match challenge and the winter loneliness fund. These in turn awarded grants to over 14,000 organisations delivering myriad activities, including encouraging social connection and tackling loneliness (59%); providing information and advice (44%) and supporting people’s mental health (38%).

The grants reached an estimated 21.5 million service users. Common positive outcomes achieved for people and communities included improved mental health and wellbeing (70%); more opportunity for social contact (62%); and reduced experiences of loneliness (58%).

The evaluation found “strong evidence” that the funding package had achieved its aims. Nearly all grant holders (97%) that used funding to cover core costs reported that the funding had helped their financial health during the pandemic, with nearly half (46%) saying it had helped a great deal. Some 13% of grant holders said

that, without the funding, they would have had to close or stop services (with the funding, this only happened in 1% of cases).

The funding allowed around 40% of grant holders to maintain or recruit new volunteers, with some 12,000 new volunteers being mobilised, just from those organisations who completed the survey. This had positive outcomes for volunteers themselves, with 93% reporting more than one positive outcome from volunteering, and 63% saying that they would be certain to continue.

The majority of grant holders (76%) also reported that they found the process of applying for grants to be “straightforward and proportionate”. They found the flexibility to use the money for core costs beneficial given the uncertainty of the pandemic.

The report also outlines eight recommendations based on the lessons learnt from this funding package which the Government will carefully consider.

[HCWS798]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Correction to PQ1131257

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): I would like to inform the House that a written answer given by the Minister for Care and Mental Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), on 2 February 2022, UIN 113125 to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) was incorrect.

In the response to Question 113125, it was stated that the United Kingdom Chief Medical Officers’ low risk drinking guidelines do not include specific guidelines on consumption of alcohol by children and young people. This remains the case. However, the answer should have stated that in 2009, the then Chief Medical Officer for England published guidance on the consumption of alcohol by children and young people. A copy of the chief medical officer’s guidelines can be found at: <https://www.ias.org.uk/uploads/pdf/News%20stories/doh-report-171209.pdf>

No assessment has been made of the accessibility of this guidance, however the guidance document was erroneously archived from gov.uk and has now been republished at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/alcohol-consumption-by-children-and-young-people>.

The Department continues to promote the guidelines in England which apply to children and young people through online platforms such as NHS.UK and the Talk to FRANK online resource, and gov.uk. Local authorities promote these guidelines as part of their public health duties.

[HCWS803]

Parliamentary Written Questions 53263 and 53380: Correction

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I would like to inform the House that written answers I gave on 18 and 21 October 2021 *Official Report* 53263 and 53380 to the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) were incorrect.

In the response to the written questions, I said that radioligand therapy is not yet licensed for the National Health Service (NHS) and has yet to receive approval from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). That was incorrect. A licensed radioligand treatment, Lutetium (177Lu) oxodotreotide, has been recommended by NICE for treating unresectable or metastatic neuroendocrine tumours (NICE Technology appraisal guidance [TA539] Published: 29 August 2018). The NHS funds Lutetium in line with NICE'S recommendations and is treating the expected number of patients estimated by NICE:

<https://www.nice.org.uk/Guidance/ta539/chapter/1-Recommendations>

NICE is also now developing guidance on Lu vipivotide tetraxetan for treating PSMA-positive hormone-relapsed metastatic prostate cancer after two or more therapies and currently expects to publish final guidance on 23 November 2022. This technology was granted a positive early access to medicine scientific opinion in April 2022 and is currently available to NHS patients as an unlicensed treatment.

[HCWS800]

Covid-19 Vaccinations: five to 11-year-olds

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The Government accepted the recommendation of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) on 16 February that five to 11-year-olds should be offered two paediatric doses of the Pfizer vaccine. Vaccinations have been offered to this age group from 4 April. A minimum interval of 12 weeks between doses is required, except for those in a clinical risk group or a household contact of someone who is immunosuppressed where the minimum interval is eight weeks. This is a non-urgent offer.

As part of our commitment to open up travel, on 28 April the Government are launching the NHS covid pass letter service for children aged five to 11 year-olds who have received a full primary course of covid-19 vaccination.

There is a limited emerging international-use case for children in this age cohort to show their covid-19 status for travel abroad, although other methods such as testing or entering with a parent or guardian with recognised covid-19 status are available in those countries. Access to the NHS covid pass will save families with children in this cohort the cost of testing otherwise required for travel and ensure that young children are able to provide proof of their covid-19 status on par with the rest of the population.

A person with parental responsibility for the child (such as the parent or guardian) will be able to request the letter online via the NHS website or by calling 119. The letter will only be sent to the address on the child's GP record.

This service will be available for children aged five to 11 resident in England, Wales and the Isle of Man. In Northern Ireland, parents or guardians of children aged five to 11 years can request a digital or printed covid certificate on behalf of a dependant. In Scotland,

a paper copy of the vaccination status of children aged five and over is available by calling the covid status helpline on 0808 196 8565.

[HCWS804]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Operation of Terrorism Legislation in 2020

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Jonathan Hall QC, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, has prepared a report on the operation in 2020 of the Terrorism Acts.

In accordance with section 36(5) of the Terrorism Act 2006, I am today laying this report before the House and copies will be available in the Vote Office. The report will also be published on gov.uk.

I am grateful to Mr Hall QC for his report. I will carefully consider its contents and the recommendations he makes and will respond formally in due course.

[HCWS801]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Switzerland: Trade Policy

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The Prime Minister and President Cassis of Switzerland held a meeting this morning, during which they discussed strengthening the bilateral relationship and boosting trade and investment ties. Following this, the call for input on an enhanced trade agreement with Switzerland has now been launched.

The UK is committed to our trade and investment relationship with Switzerland, our 10th largest trade partner with bilateral trade worth nearly £35 billion a year. The UK's current trading relationship is based on the 1972 EU-Switzerland agreement, rolled over on 1 January 2021. While this includes many provisions on trade in goods, intellectual property and government procurement, it crucially does not contain any agreements for services or digital trade, which account for half of our economic relationship with Switzerland and are a key reality of the global economy in the 21st century.

As two services powerhouses, negotiations for a bespoke UK-Switzerland free trade agreement are a significant opportunity to build on our current trade agreement and negotiate an ambitious, unprecedented deal that will accelerate the growth of our already significant trading relationship, creating economic growth and supporting jobs in both countries.

The call for input will provide businesses, public sector bodies, individuals and other interested stakeholders with the opportunity to give valuable feedback and highlight their priorities for a closer trading relationship with Switzerland.

The feedback received from stakeholders will be crucial when shaping our mandate, and will inform detailed negotiations preparation, and policy positions. The Department for International Trade is committed to ensuring future trade agreements and their provisions are informed by stakeholder needs and shaped by the demands of the British economy.

The launch of the call for input is a key step in our joint ambition to renegotiate a high quality and ambitious trade agreement, focused on creating even greater opportunities for UK businesses. Our trade with Switzerland has increased almost three-fold over the last 20 years, with service exports rising from £2.4 billion in 2000 to £12.2 billion in 2020. These new negotiations will allow us to increase this even further, while leveraging our respective strengths in talent and innovation to agree cutting-edge digital provisions.

The UK and its partners in Switzerland share a desire to develop closer ties. While a timescale for negotiations will be confirmed and set out in due course following

consultation with Swiss counterparts, the call for input will seek to support the goal of greater economic prosperity for businesses and will ensure that their needs are heard. The Government are committed to transparency and will ensure that Parliament, the devolved Administrations, UK citizens and businesses have access to information on our trade negotiations.

The call for input can be accessed using the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/trade-with-switzerland-call-for-input>.

[HCWS805]

Petition

Thursday 28 April 2022

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Devil's Point and Firestone Bay

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

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

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

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Luke Pollard, *Official Report*, 23 March 2022; Vol. 711, c. 405.]

[P002723]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow):

Thank you very much for sharing your petition with me as Secretary of State at DEFRA.

My Department welcomes applications for bathing water designations for both coastal and inland waters. Anyone can apply for sites to be designated, including local authorities, groups and individuals. In fact, my officials encourage applications by annually writing to the Chief Executive of every local authority in England, as well as by sending similar letters to other stakeholders like swimming associations.

In order for a site to be considered, it must have a large number of bathers relative to the size of the site and have facilities and infrastructure to support bathing as set out in the Bathing Water Regulations 2013. The application must include a survey of bather numbers during the bathing season from 15 May to 30 September, information about the facilities that are available at the site and evidence of a local consultation on the proposal. We would also need to know who is responsible for managing the site, whether that be the local authority or a private operator.

The annual deadline for applications is 31 October and my Department endeavours to make a decision in time for the next bathing season, which starts on 15 May annually, as long as the necessary information is provided.

Detailed guidance on what is needed in an application can be found on gov.uk using this link: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/bathing-waters-apply-for-designation-or-de-designation>.

My officials will look forward to receiving an application for Devil's Point and Firestone Bay and would be happy to answer any further questions.

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**not later than
Thursday 5 May 2022**

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