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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Tuesday 7 June 2022**

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# House of Commons

*Tuesday 7 June 2022*

*The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Speaker's Statement

11.33 am

**Mr Speaker:** Before we start today's business, I wish to make a short statement. Today marks the retirement of Alex Newton, Editor of the *Official Report*—or *Hansard*, as most of us think of it. Alex joined the House in 1989 and became Editor in 2015. As Editor, he oversaw the introduction of a much-improved website for *Hansard*, making it easier for everyone to follow our proceedings here. He also took a leading role in ensuring that *Hansard* and the Broadcasting Unit responded so effectively to the challenge of covid. Alex is enormously well-liked and respected within the *Official Report* and across the House Service for his integrity, commitment and professionalism. I know that all Members will want to thank him for his service to the House and wish him a very happy retirement. We also send our best wishes to Alex's successor, Jack Homer.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Renewable Energy

1. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What plans he has to support the development of the renewable energy sector. [900382]

20. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase investment in renewable energy projects. [900403]

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy** (**Kwasi Kwarteng**): In April, the Government published plans for accelerating renewable energy deployment in our British energy security strategy. Of course, that is very much at the centre of our strategy to ensure sustainability, affordability and security in the long term in our energy.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD):

**Wera Hobhouse:** I wish Alex a happy retirement; where would we be without *Hansard*?

Ofgem's remit is a real barrier to increasing grid capacity, as it is currently impossible to make anticipatory grid infrastructure investment. That is slowing the growth of renewables and pushing up household energy bills. If we had the new wind and solar farms that the Government are seeking to procure in this summer's

contacts for difference auction already on the grid, every UK household would save £100 on their energy bill this winter. So why have the Government still not reformed Ofgem's remit?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** I am sure that the hon. Lady paid attention to the Queen's Speech and will have noted that it contained an energy Bill, which will precisely redefine Ofgem in order to attract the anticipatory investment to which she referred.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Laurence Robertson. He is not here. I call Stephen Flynn, the SNP spokesperson.

**Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Of course when we are talking about renewables, it is important in this Chamber to reflect upon the fact that Scotland boasts 25% of Europe's offshore wind capacity and of its tidal capacity. Now that the UK Treasury is going to be coining in some £13 billion from Scotland's North sea oil and gas sector this year alone, will it give a little bit back and match fund the Scottish Government's £500 million just transition fund?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** I am delighted to see the hon. Gentleman so enthusiastic about energy in Scotland. I wish he would extend his support to nuclear power and other forms of decarbonised baseload. On his question, the Treasury has announced a strong investment incentive in relation to the energy profits levy.

**Stephen Flynn:** The Government have £13 billion in their back hipper, yet they will not even give £500 million back. But we should not be surprised, because this UK Government are failing to fast-track the Acorn carbon capture and underground storage project; continue to preside over Scottish renewables projects paying the highest level of grid charging in the entirety of Europe; and confirmed just yesterday that big oil incentives will not be carried over to big renewables either. So may I ask the Secretary of State: is it not the case that, as ever, Scotland has the energy but we do not have the power?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** Scotland has the energy, and in the form of the UK Government it has a strong supporter of renewables and energy in Scotland. The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) and I negotiated the North sea transition deal, and we are also pleased to have announced the energy transition zone in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, powered and funded by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

#### Energy Price Cap

2. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of raising the energy price cap on standards of living. [900383]

21. **Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of raising the energy price cap on standards of living. [900404]

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng):** The Government are well aware of the difficulties households are facing, which is exactly why we have provided a further £15 billion of support, on top of the £22 billion announced earlier this year, to support people with the cost of living.

**Kirsten Oswald:** The energy price cap affects consumers and has major implications for business. The price of energy is recognised as one of the key drivers of inflation, because of rising prices at all levels. That is confounded by the Chancellor's post-covid rises to VAT on hospitality and tourism. So does the right hon. Gentleman regret not doing more to get the Chancellor to provide more support to small businesses and small business owners, to help them and to help keep prices and inflation down?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** The hon. Lady will remember that throughout the covid period my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer supported businesses to the tune of something like £400 billion. A lot of that support, in the form of loans and the future fund, is ongoing. I do not think we can take any lectures from the hon. Lady on supporting business through what has been a very difficult period.

**Angela Crawley:** This week, the citizens advice bureaux in Scotland revealed that 62% of the inquiries they receive relate to energy issues. As Ofgem has warned that people can expect a staggering 42% rise in energy prices, does the Secretary of State regret the time he has spent defending the Prime Minister against confidence votes instead of providing much-needed support for businesses and energy consumers to tackle the cost of living crisis?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** As I have said once and am sure I will repeat, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has dedicated £37 billion precisely to help people through what is a very difficult time in relation to the cost of living.

**Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con):** I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the excellent package of support for consumers and businesses, but I am sure he will agree with me—unlike the Opposition parties—that it is not just about what the Chancellor can do to step in: there are lots of steps that consumers and businesses can take for themselves to reduce their own energy costs before the energy price cap is changed again this autumn. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what more can be done to help consumers and businesses to cut their own energy costs?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has raised that issue. As a keen follower of these matters, she will know what we have done in relation to the heat and buildings strategy, which sets out clearly the kinds of steps that we want people to see in respect of insulation and the possibility of selling energy back to the grid. We are doing lots of exciting things in this policy area. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that I am always interested in her ideas and I am delighted that she is heading our Back-Bench policy committee in this area.

**Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green):** One of the fastest and most effective ways to protect people from the impact of rising energy costs would be an ambitious retrofit and insulation programme, which should have been at the heart of the Government's approach but has been conspicuous by its absence. The Government support pledged so far for energy efficiency falls £1.4 billion short of their manifesto commitment, so will the Secretary of State tell us what more he plans to do on the issue? In particular, will he tell us with absolute certainty that legislation for ECO4—the energy company obligation—which was due in April, will not face any further delays and will definitely be laid before Parliament before the summer recess?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** It is not my job to say when legislation will be coming into this House—[*Interruption.*] What I will say—[*Interruption.*] What I will say specifically in relation to decarbonisation is that we have a clear heat and buildings strategy. The manifesto commitment covered 10 years, so it was not over the term of the Parliament. There was a clear manifesto commitment over 10 years and more money clearly needs to be spent to honour that commitment over a 10-year spending period.

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

**Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab):** It would be really nice if the Secretary of State told us when the ECO4 legislation is coming, because ECO4 is not going to work unless that legislation comes forward.

The Secretary of State knows that the new price cap and the increase in customer bills will have a devastating impact on customers' struggle with the cost of living, so why is his Department directly contributing to the sky-high price cap levels by putting into place new customer levies—such as the socialisation of the costs of failed energy companies, the green gas levy and the nuclear regulated asset base levy—that will add perhaps £100 to the upcoming and future price cap levels, and hence to customer bills? The Secretary of State talks of Government assistance to help customers to cope with their bills, but is it not very much about giving with one hand and taking back with the other? Should customers not be angry at this cynical policy?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** There is no reason to be angry about the support, because the £37 billion of support is very real. On the supplier of last resort, the hon. Gentleman will know that 26 firms had to leave the market as a consequence of sky-high wholesale prices, and all the SOLR levy does is socialise those costs within the industry. It was a necessary device to make sure that customers can ease on to other providers without interruption.

### New Low-Carbon Technologies

3. **David Johnston (Wantage) (Con):** What steps he is taking to support new low-carbon technologies. [900384]

9. **Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con):** What steps he is taking to support new low-carbon technologies. [900391]

10. **Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con):** What steps he is taking to support new low-carbon technologies. [900392]

**The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands):** Clean energy technologies are fundamental in both securing our energy supply and meeting net zero. This Conservative Government have set out their ambition to invest up to £22 billion in research and development by 2024. Meanwhile, we are moving to annual options for renewable energy and investing big in our nuclear future.

**David Johnston:** In recent months, I have had a number of emails from constituents who have taken the Government's encouragement to look at getting a heat pump, but have found the cost just too high for them. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to help bring down the cost of heat pumps so that they are more affordable for more people?

**Greg Hands:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. We want to go with the grain of human nature, which means that, when it is time to replace a gas boiler, the heat pump is a competitive option in terms of price. That is why we think the cost of heat pumps can reduce by 25% to 50% by 2025. We have our £450 million boiler upgrade scheme to provide capital grants of up to £6,000, and that is in addition to the zero per cent rate of VAT on installation.

**Chris Clarkson:** As we transition away from gas, hydrogen—in particular green hydrogen generated by renewable sources such as that at Scout Moor wind farm in my Heywood and Middleton constituency—gives the UK the unique opportunity to become an exporter of energy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is good not just for our economy and energy security, but for communities such as Heywood and Middleton where it will create new and exciting jobs?

**Greg Hands:** My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituency and for the hydrogen sector. I was at the global hydrogen summit about three weeks ago where exactly the possibility of hydrogen exports was very much the topic of the day. That is why we have doubled the ambition in our British energy security strategy to go to 10 GW of low-carbon hydrogen production by 2030, which will provide fantastic opportunities right the way across the country, notably in his constituency as well.

**Mr Baker:** I am very keen to help the Government find viable paths to net zero, which is why I took a meeting with a firm that has developed a route to continuous power from tidal basins. Can I bring those people to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss how that solution, remarkable as it is, produces continuous, not intermittent, net zero power, so that he can learn more about what could be done?

**Greg Hands:** I thank my hon. Friend for his continued interest in all matters relating to net zero. My door is always open to him, particularly in bringing innovative proposals on how we will get to net zero. He will know that the Government have invested more than £175 million in tidal energy projects in the past two decades and we have £20 million allocated in the current allocation round for the contracts for difference for tidal stream power.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

**Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab):** Yesterday, a Treasury Minister was unable to confirm whether the climate compatibility checkpoint would be applied to the recent tax cut for the oil and gas industry investing in further drilling. Can the Minister today confirm whether that climate checkpoint will apply to existing investment decisions and not just future investment decisions after the checkpoint has been introduced?

**Greg Hands:** As the Financial Secretary to the Treasury said yesterday, that consultation on the climate compatibility checkpoint has closed and the Government will be responding to that consultation in due course.

**Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op):** A recent Public Accounts Committee report on net zero highlighted the real challenge of getting consumers onboard. Going net zero and embracing low-carbon technologies cannot be a preserve of the wealthiest and there needs to be much more work by Government. What are the Government doing to ensure that consumers are supported to make green choices?

**Greg Hands:** The hon. Lady raises some very good points. I am looking forward to appearing before the House of Lords Committee on this very topic on Thursday. I am sure that her Committee has done important work on this. We want to make this process as affordable as possible for people. That is why we have introduced the boiler upgrade scheme. That is why we are spending £6.6 billion of public money in this Parliament on energy efficiency, making sure that those options are there and are affordable. That is one of our key aims, particularly if we are to get to 600,000 heat pumps per annum by 2028.

**Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op):** The Minister may know that our gas pipes are capable of taking 40% hydrogen, as they did with coal gas. Will he meet me and also Professor Andrew Barron who works at Swansea University, which is pushing forward technology to take the hydrogen produced by renewable wind farms off peak, converting it and putting it into the gas grid and therefore reducing the carbon footprint of boiling an egg by 40%. Surely that is the best way forward in the short term to reduce our carbon footprint.

**Greg Hands:** The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. Late last year when I visited the Whitelee wind farm just south of Glasgow, the UK's largest onshore wind farm and the second largest in Europe, I saw for myself the potential there for renewable energy to convert to hydrogen. The UK Government announced a facility to assist with that. Blending is also an important aspect that we will actively be looking at. Of course we will have a number of other important uses of hydrogen, notably in maritime, transportation and the decarbonisation of industry, and those are all in the frame for consideration for what will undoubtedly be our big need for hydrogen in the future.

### Apprenticeship Levy

4. **Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con):** What recent discussions he has had with representatives of businesses on the rules in respect of the Apprenticeship Levy.

[900386]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley):** The Secretary of State and the ministerial team regularly meet business representative organisations to discuss how Government can continue to support businesses and help them to grow. We regularly discuss the apprenticeship levy and are working closely with colleagues in the Department for Education to feed back the views of the business community.

**Dr Evans:** I was lucky enough to visit Forterra in my constituency near Desford, where it is building a £95 million brick factory. Forterra raised the apprenticeship levy because it is finding difficulties trying to get more people to come and work in the likes of the heavy goods vehicle sector. Part of the difficulty is the constraints around how the levy can be used. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can get rid of some of the red tape and be creative for those industries that are particularly struggling with the legislation and the restraints around the apprenticeship levy?

**Lee Rowley:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on speaking up for businesses in his area and on Forterra, which I understand from reading will be one of the largest brick factories in Europe. I would be very happy to meet him and I am grateful for any comments that he or other colleagues have about the apprenticeship levy.

**Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** We are trying to find out this morning what the Secretary of State's job is. It says "Industrial Strategy", but how can we have an industrial strategy without skills? The Minister knows that something is seriously wrong with the apprenticeship levy—and what about kickstart? That has quietly died the death. It was the flagship training policy of this country. What the hell is going on on the Government Benches if they do not know what their job is?

**Lee Rowley:** We always welcome all contributions, particularly constructive ones such as that one. The apprenticeship levy has been in place since 2015: among the most recent statistics, more than 100,000 people have begun apprenticeships and under-25s make up a substantial proportion of the number of people taking up apprenticeships. While we will always look at how we can improve things, a substantial amount of progress has been made in recent years.

### Fusion Energy

5. **Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to promote fusion energy in the UK. [900387]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman):** The widely reported breakthroughs in fusion energy by the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority team at Harwell this year signal UK leadership in a new era of industrial-scale fusion energy. I am sure the whole House takes pride in that achievement and will want to pass our best wishes on to the team at Harwell. That is why we are investing £700 million in the next phase of fusion facilities and research. We are announcing the location of the spherical tokamak, our first industrial power plant, and this month we will launch our paper on the regulation of fusion energy for industrial roll-out.

**Siobhan Baillie:** I have written to the Secretary of State recently about our Severn Edge fusion bid in Berkeley and Oldbury, because we provide the ideal location for the spherical tokamak for energy production fusion programme. We can deliver the project and we have cross-party support spanning the south-west and Wales. I believe this is a good opportunity for Government to prove that we are not just levelling up the north. Does my hon. Friend agree that the decision on where to locate the STEP prototype is crucial to the UK's fusion ambitions, and will he say a little bit more about the timetable he is working to?

**George Freeman:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on being such an advocate for her patch. I completely agree that the location of the spherical tokamak plant is critical to our future fusion industry ambitions. Some 15 sites across the UK have applied to host STEP, and the UKAEA has shortlisted five: Ardeer in Ayrshire, Goole in the East Riding of Yorkshire, Moorside in Cumbria, Severn Edge in Gloucestershire and West Burton in Nottinghamshire. The UKAEA has now completed a detailed analysis of those sites and has submitted its recommendation to the Secretary of State, who will make a final decision and announcement by the end of the year.

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** Dounreay in Caithness in my constituency was in the 1950s the site of the UK's first nuclear reactor. The nuclear industry did a very great deal to provide local employment and to halt the curse of the highlands, namely depopulation. Today, we have a licensed site, we have a willing and skilled workforce and we have a local population who support the nuclear industry. Will the Secretary of State or the Minister talk to the Scottish Government, who have not ruled out nuclear fusion, about the potential for developing nuclear fusion at a site such as Dounreay?

**George Freeman:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I congratulate him on his enlightened stance: he is supportive of the UK and the Scottish nuclear industry—a position we all rather wish the Scottish nationalists would take more widely. I have regular meetings with the Scottish Ministers for science, technology and innovation. This Government are very supportive of that cluster; if only the Scottish nationalists were.

### Leaving the EU: Benefit for Businesses

6. **Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con):** What steps he is taking to ensure that UK businesses benefit from the UK leaving the EU. [900388]

22. **Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con):** What steps he is taking to ensure that UK businesses benefit from the UK leaving the EU. [900405]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley):** Leaving the European Union gives us a fantastic opportunity, over the long term, to chart a new course to bring further prosperity to the UK. The Government are committed to growing the UK's economy by making the most of our Brexit freedoms, signing new trade deals, and, over time, lightening the regulatory burden.

**Julie Marson:** I have previously compared the role of Government to that of a cricket groundsman preparing the best possible wicket on which our players—our businesses, including mine in Hertford and Stortford—can play to their strengths. Will my hon. Friend outline the steps that we are taking to drop unnecessary regulation following our departure from the EU, so that our brilliant businesses can compete and win?

**Lee Rowley:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her important point. Unlike her, I am not able to make any comparisons with cricket, but we know that unnecessary regulation, where it exists, is a real burden for businesses, and we are committed to reducing it. There is also work under way on data laws, alcohol duty and imperial markings. There is the forthcoming Brexit freedoms Bill, and cross-Government work to look at reducing burdens. All of that should mean positive movement in this important area of policy.

**Craig Tracey:** Our insurance and financial services sector is a great British success story, and it helps to fund our local public services. The majority of employment in the sector is outside London and spread across many of our constituencies. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that we continue to support the growth of this industry, and that there must be a strong competitiveness duty on the regulator, so that we can make the most of opportunities now that we have left the EU?

**Lee Rowley:** I know that my hon. Friend does a huge amount of work in this area as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on insurance and financial services, and he has a background in the sector. Although he is tempting me to make policy that is dealt with by another Department, I know that his point will have been heard by my colleagues in the Treasury.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Under the Northern Ireland protocol, Northern Ireland businesses pay mainland suppliers a fee to ship to them. Will the Minister consider refunding businesses this fee, which they must accept because the list of suppliers who will take on the hassle of the web of red-tape confusion is ever-dwindling, leaving very little choice when it comes to supplying goods to Northern Ireland?

**Lee Rowley:** The hon. Member is hugely committed to finding ways through the challenges around Northern Ireland, and I congratulate him on the work that he does. I will certainly pass back his comments, and I am happy to discuss them with him separately, if that is helpful.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): Following on from the cricket analogy, one of the golden rules in that great game is that when your time is up, you walk; you do not wait until you are told.

The Minister is talking about the benefits to businesses of leaving the EU. When will businesses in my constituency start to feel those benefits? All they are seeing now is businesses closing because they cannot get the staff, because of interruption to their supply chain, or because their exports are getting held up on their way across the channel. When will things turn around after the disaster of Brexit, so that we are at least back to where we were before 2016?

**Lee Rowley:** That was a nice try from the SNP at linking those things. As the SNP and the hon. Gentleman know, there are substantial global issues at the moment that all Governments are grappling with, and the Government here in the United Kingdom have been very clear about their desire to support businesses and to help people through these difficult times.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): British business depends on British science for long-term national growth, and the No. 1 issue facing British scientists right now is our participation in the world's largest science funding programme—the European Union's £95 billion Horizon programme. Since 2007, British scientists have won over £14 billion from Horizon—more than we put in—but this is about more than money; it concerns international prestige. Horizon is a collaborative network of over 30 countries. Let us face it: this Government will never be able to replicate that. The Prime Minister said that he had an oven-ready Brexit deal; why is British science being left on the shelf?

**Lee Rowley:** I am not going to refight Brexit and revisit the positions we all went through in the last Parliament. Horizon is important. The UK Government have been very clear about our desire to continue with Horizon. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who is the Minister for science, continues extensive work to ensure that that happens. The EU has a choice to make, and my hon. Friend will be in Brussels tomorrow to continue that conversation.

## Business Investment

7. **Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on securing business investment in the UK. [900389]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley):** In recent months, the UK has had a strong track record of attracting inward investment, including in cars—in Nissan, Stellantis and Ford—and in batteries, through Envision AESC; and Airbus announced a further ramping up of its A320 line in Broughton a few weeks ago. In April, the Department launched the new global Britain investment fund, which will build on our track record and encourage internationally mobile companies to invest in the UK.

**Dr Spencer:** I thank the Minister for his response. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the register of interests, my chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on Finland, and my vice-chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on Sweden. Our relationship with Finland and Sweden has never been stronger; there is the mutual defence treaty, our support for their application for NATO, and the recent Sweden-UK life science agreement. Does my hon. Friend agree that Runnymede and Weybridge, with its connectivity, academic institutions and strong tech and life science sector, is a fantastic place to build on that investment and that relationship, and to bring in further investment from northern Europe?

**Lee Rowley:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that his constituency has a very important role to play in the future of life sciences, and I commend his work on that strategically important sector. He mentioned the life sciences memorandum of understanding that we signed with Sweden last week. Our relationship with Sweden goes back more than three centuries and is worth £20 billion, and there are 100 Swedish life science companies in the UK. That is another example of close working across the globe on progress for everyone's benefit.

**Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op):** The Centre for Policy Studies is not alone in having just published damning research from business leaders. It states that Britain is becoming a less attractive place to invest; the UK is slipping behind other countries because of red tape, rising taxes and ministerial complacency. Could it be because we have a chaotic, rudderless, high-tax Conservative Government, with no industrial strategy and no plan for growth? Is it not time that the Secretary of State listened to businesses, tackled rising business costs and backed calls to spike the national insurance hike? He should know that it is the wrong tax at the wrong time.

**Lee Rowley:** That is a curious line of questioning from the Opposition Front-Bench team, given that Nissan has made £1 billion of investment in recent months in Sunderland, Stellantis has made an investment of more than £100 million in Vauxhall at Ellesmere Port, and there is additional investment in green technology and life sciences—the list goes on and on. Of course there is more to do, and of course as a listening Government we will always look at what more we can do to make us the most attractive place to invest in the G7 and across the world. We have a good track record that we will continue to build on.

#### Affordable Energy: Winter 2022-23

8. **Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to help ensure affordable energy provision during winter 2022-23. [900390]

**The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands):** The Government have announced a package of support measures totalling over £37 billion this year. It includes a £400 grant to households to help them with their energy bills when that is needed most.

**Judith Cummins:** Two weeks ago, we found out that we have a huge surplus of national gas but nowhere to store it. That was swiftly followed by the announcement that as many as 6 million households face power cuts this winter because of gas shortages. Will the Minister give a guarantee today that this Government can keep the lights on for both households and industry this winter? A business in my constituency told me that its energy bills have soared from £7 million to £35 million. What support are the Government giving to those energy-intensive industries?

**Greg Hands:** There is a lot in that question, but the scenario the hon. Lady paints is very extreme. She will know that we are looking actively at what we can do on the storage side. On producing energy, I find it a bit rich of the Labour party to criticise us. This is the party that said, in 1997, that there was no economic case for new

nuclear power stations; the party that increased, rather than cut, our dependence on gas, which went from accounting for 32% of our electricity generation to 46% of it; and the party that failed to invest in renewables, which, over 10 years, have gone from accounting for 7% of our electricity generation to 43% of it. We will take no lessons from the Opposition on helping people with energy generation and with their bills.

#### Incubator and Accelerator Hubs

11. **Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps he is taking to support business and social business incubator and accelerator hubs. [900393]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman):** Incubators and accelerators across the country play a vital role in helping our high-growth start-ups and scale-ups. That is why we continue to fund the strength in places fund, and are investing £100 million to pilot new innovation accelerators. That is also why, on my various tours around clusters, I recently went to the Leicester space and satellite hub, the Leeds digital health and medtech hub in the hon. Lady's county, the Northumbria University and Ashington further education hub, and the BioYorkshire hub in her area.

**Rachael Maskell:** York's economic future depends on releasing the talent of our entrepreneurs and social enterprises. To do that, we need to ensure that they have space to innovate and grow. In each of the last four quarters, however, we have seen the loss of 100,000 entrepreneurs, so what investment will be made to ensure that we have the infrastructure in place for the acceleration and incubation of the future business industry?

**George Freeman:** The hon. Lady makes an important point about social enterprises being mainstreamed in the business community. She may have seen the recent report by the all-party parliamentary group for social enterprise, of which I have long been a supporter, that argued that we should mainstream social enterprise in the BEIS policy framework, which is an interesting proposal. We have just announced the biggest increase in research and development and innovation funding—an increase of £25 billion over the next three years. I have asked UK Research and Innovation to focus on that incubation hub infrastructure around the country, so that we can continue to support the university and small business networks that create the opportunities for tomorrow.

#### Support for Manufacturers

13. **Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con):** What steps he is taking to support manufacturers. [900395]

16. **Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con):** What steps he is taking to support the manufacturing sector. [900398]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley):** Manufacturing—from the heaviest of our industries to our most modern fourth industrial revolution factory—is the bedrock of our country's resilience, and we are committed to supporting it. This year, we will launch a new manufacturing



investment prospectus to promote the UK as the destination of choice for investment, and to signpost the support available to businesses.

**Holly Mumby-Croft:** Decarbonisation and the production of green steel represent a huge opportunity for steelmakers such as British Steel in Scunthorpe. Steelmakers are raring to go, but they need further policy guidance before they invest. Can my hon. Friend reassure me that he will continue to work closely, in the excellent way that he has done, with steelmakers to ensure that they have the guidance they need to reach those goals?

**Lee Rowley:** I can absolutely reassure my hon. Friend that we want to continue to work with British Steel, and with her—she is a champion for Scunthorpe and the surrounding communities—to ensure that it has a strong future, and to plot a pathway to treading more lightly on the earth.

**Kate Griffiths:** The recent report by Midlands Connect outlined that upgrading the A50/A500 corridor that runs through my constituency of Burton and Uttoxeter will unlock £12 billion for the economy and create more than 12,000 jobs. Will my hon. Friend meet me and other colleagues who represent the north midlands manufacturing corridor to see how his Department can support these upgrades and unlock enterprise opportunities across the region?

**Lee Rowley:** As a fellow midlands MP, I very much welcome the report from Midlands Connect about the opportunities that our region can take together for the long term. I know how hard my hon. Friend and her colleagues in Staffordshire work on this, and I would be happy to meet her to discuss the matter further.

### Neonatal Leave and Pay

14. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What plans his Department has to bring forward legislative proposals on neonatal leave and pay. [900396]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):** We recognise that parents of babies receiving neonatal care need extra support during some of the most difficult days of their lives. We are committed to introducing neonatal leave and pay to meet this need as soon as parliamentary time allows.

**David Linden:** We are all disappointed that there is no employment Bill, but there is cross-party agreement in the House on neonatal leave and pay. Leaving to one side the more controversial aspects of the employment Bill, what would stop the Government supporting a stand-alone Bill to enact policies on neonatal leave and pay?

**Paul Scully:** We absolutely welcome and recognise the interest in this issue, especially from the hon. Gentleman, who has personal experience of the subject and has raised it a number of times in the House. I remain committed to the legislation. We can work on it in different ways. I believe that we have a meeting scheduled, and I am looking forward to discussing how we can deliver these policies in good time.

**Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): I was pleased to meet Ministers and the Prime Minister recently to talk about the importance of delivering the vital Government commitment to bring in neonatal leave and pay by the 2023 target that they set in their Budget two years ago. Work continues on finding a timeslot in which to take the measures through Parliament. Meanwhile, it is vital that Ministers in the Department continue to work on the required background measures, such as the guidance for businesses and for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, so that they are ready for introduction as soon as possible when we get parliamentary time. Can the Minister update me on the work that he has been doing to ensure that we are ready?

**Paul Scully:** I thank my hon. Friend for the impassioned work that he does on this issue—again, following his personal experience. He is right: we are not just standing still while waiting for parliamentary time. We are taking action to prepare for implementation once the legislation is there, including by having conversations with third sector stakeholders and business representatives. Officials have also spoken to HMRC about developing a system to implement the measures when we have the legislation.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Minister says “when parliamentary time allows”, but the Government could have provided time by putting an employment Bill in the Queen's Speech. On neonatal pay, flexible working and an enforcement body to protect workers' rights, this Government promise a lot but deliver very little. Ministers have promised an employment Bill over 20 times, yet it still appears nowhere in the legislative programme. Is not the only job that this Government are interested in protecting the Prime Minister's?

**Paul Scully:** Absolutely not. What we are interested in is jobs right across the UK—quality, highly productive, high-skilled, high-wage jobs. We will introduce all the employment measures to which we are committed in good time, when parliamentary time allows.

### Energy Efficiency: Domestic Buildings

15. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Whether he plans to take further steps to improve the energy efficiency of domestic buildings. [900397]

**The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands):** The Government have announced a package of measures designed to support the most vulnerable in these unprecedented times. It includes support for the local authority delivery scheme, the home upgrade grant, the social housing decarbonisation fund and the boiler upgrade scheme, and takes our total funding across this Parliament to £6.6 billion.

**Paul Blomfield:** The Minister knows that reducing consumption is vital to households and to the country, but back in 2013 the Conservative-led Government cut energy efficiency programmes, which led to a 92% fall in home insulation; and the flagship green homes grant scheme was scrapped as a failure just six months after its launch. When will the Government commit to the

ambitious programme of retro-insulation that we need if we are to cut emissions, slash family bills, reduce gas imports and create thousands of jobs?

**Greg Hands:** We are committed to that programme, and that is exactly why I have outlined the £6.6 billion of support in this Parliament. We have achievements as well: since 2010, the percentage of UK homes rated A to C for energy efficiency has gone from 13% to 46%. That is almost a fourfold increase under this Government in homes that are rated good for energy efficiency. We have put a lot of money into heat pumps and the heat and buildings strategy. I suggest that the hon. Member look at that strategy, which we launched only last October. He should study it and then come back with further questions.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Dame Maria Miller, and congratulate her on her damehood.

### Workers' Rights

17. **Dame Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve workers' rights. [900399]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):** Through unprecedented increases to the national living wage and a range of legislative measures introduced since 2019, we are building a high-skilled, high-productivity, high-wage economy that delivers on our ambition to make the UK the best place in the world to work.

**Dame Maria Miller:** I thank my hon. Friend for his answer, but a great deal of his really good work could be for naught if we still allow employers to use confidentiality clauses to cover up mismanagement and discrimination in the workplace. Ministers have acknowledged this as a problem, and the Solicitors Regulation Authority's warning notice, issued four years ago, is not universally understood. When will the Minister act, and put into law measures to outlaw the use of these dreadful clauses?

**Paul Scully:** I add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend on being honoured as a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire—it is well deserved. The Government consulted on the misuse of confidentiality clauses between workers and their employees back in 2019. In response, we committed to legislating to ensure that employers are not able to intimidate victims into silence. We remain committed to doing so, and I will continue to work with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on ensuring that we introduce this necessary legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

### Fire and Rehire

18. **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): Whether he plans to bring forward legislative proposals to prohibit fire and rehire practices. [900401]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):** The Government will bring forward a new statutory code on the practice of fire and rehire. We will publish a draft for consultation in due course, and bring the code into force when parliamentary time allows.

**Rosie Cooper:** Last year, when British Gas threatened thousands of its staff with fire and rehire, one of my constituents wrote and told me that the “human cost” had been the saddest part, and that

“the mental health strain on me and my colleagues has been so very difficult to watch.”

Since 2020, almost 3 million workers have been told to reapply for their jobs, with worse conditions. I heard the Minister's response to my initial question, but the question that is rebounding round the Chamber, to almost every answer I have heard so far, is not about the intention, but about when. Will the Minister commit today to bringing forward a no ifs, no buts ban on the abhorrent practice of fire and rehire?

**Paul Scully:** What we are not going to do is ban a situation that allows flexibility for employers that are in trouble. We are, however—[*Interruption.*] Well, it is all seen as black and white by the Opposition, but they are very anti-business in that. The hon. Lady cites an example, and there are human costs involved in the most egregious cases of fire and rehire. That is what we will be tackling through the statutory code that we will announce in due course.

### New and Advanced Nuclear Power

19. **Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to deliver new and advanced nuclear power in the UK. [900402]

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng):** As my hon. Friend knows, for the first time in 20 years we are committed to much more nuclear capacity than we have ever seen, and the target of 24 GW by 2050 is ambitious but perfectly achievable.

**Jack Lopresti:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that an early decision to announce the commissioning of the first small modular reactors, built by Rolls-Royce, will provide additional investment in our national infrastructure, more jobs and, crucially, help to secure our sovereign energy independence of supply?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** Earlier this year I was delighted to announce investment—£210 million as I remember—in Rolls-Royce, and the SMRs, as well as advanced nuclear reactors, represent an exciting development in new nuclear. Looking at Labour Members, I must say that it is gratifying to see nuclear power being defended, as under their watch nuclear power was denuded and derided.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Hinkley Point C is 50% over budget and running years late. The Government cannot get investment for Sizewell C, and their impact assessment states that a new nuclear power station could cost £63 billion. Is the former Energy Minister, the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), correct to say that it is utter fantasy to pretend that this Government can deliver a new nuclear reactor each year?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** The strategy is committed to 24 GW, and it is about large-scale nuclear and SMRs, which my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) referred to. It will be a balance, and we

feel that we can reach that. It is rich of Scottish National party Members to deride our nuclear programme when they do not even agree with it. They think the whole thing is a complete waste of time. Where else would we find decarbonised baseload? They do not have the answer to that.

### Topical Questions

T1. [900406] **Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng):** I am pleased to announce that since I last addressed the House we have committed £37 billion, along with our friends in the Treasury, to support the most vulnerable households with the cost of living. We have managed to attract substantial new investments across the piece in new technologies, and we continue to focus on energy, to ensure that it is sustainable, affordable and, above all, secure in the coming months.

**Claire Coutinho:** Semiconductors are an unbelievably important strategic asset to this country, and I commend the Secretary of State for calling in the acquisition of Newport Wafer Fab, which is our largest producer of semiconductors and an important innovator of compound semiconductors. That is exactly what the National Security and Investment Act 2021 was designed to do. Will he update the House on his next steps?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** My hon. Friend will know that the NSI Act, which came into scope at the beginning of this year, gives me as Secretary of State powers to call in transactions that I feel are detrimental to national security. After long consideration and weighing up all the evidence, Newport Wafer Fab was, I think rightly, deemed to be such a transaction.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): If a chair or chief executive of a FTSE 100 company presided over a culture of rule breaking, broke the law themselves and then said that they would do it again, would that person have the Business Secretary's support, or would he demand better standards than that in public life?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** I think that we deserve and are all well placed and right to demand the highest standards in any profession across any position and in any institution.

**Jonathan Reynolds:** I agree, but if the Business Secretary believes that integrity and honesty are important in all walks of life, he should have voted against the Prime Minister last night.

I welcome the Government's U-turn on a windfall tax, but yet again they say one thing and do another. There is uncertainty about who the tax will apply to, and there is worry that the chaotic nature of the announcement could perversely incentivise investment in fossil fuels over renewables. Uncertainty and botched announcements are a feature of the Government, which is one reason why business investment has been so poor

under the Conservatives. When will the Business Secretary offer certainty to businesses on who exactly the Government intend to apply the tax to?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** The hon. Member will know that issues relating to taxation are a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. As far as the hon. Member's windfall tax is concerned, I have always been opposed to such taxes on principle, and I continue to be opposed. I hope that this energy profits levy does not discourage investment; actually, it has features that do attract greater investment.

T2. [900407] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): I am sure that Ministers will join me in congratulating a Royal Mail depot in my constituency that has moved its fleet to electric vehicles. However, that does place a lot of demand on the system, so will Ministers ensure that, when formulating policy, industrial estates, for example, have sufficient electricity to enable even more of them to change to electric vehicles?

**The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands):** I know of my hon. Friend's ongoing interest in all matters in relation to energy, and he makes an important point about big energy users such as the Royal Mail planning and ensuring that they are efficient and robust for the future. I will ensure that his point on industrial estates is reflected back to our Department, to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and to other relevant Departments.

T3. [900409] **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I have heard from constituents in West Derby how the use of fire and rehire tactics by employers such as British Gas and British Airways put them in unbearable situations during the pandemic. Shamefully, in the middle of a cost of living crisis, we see many rogue employers across all sectors utilising those immoral practices on a daily basis to drive people into poverty. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) made clear, we need employment legislation now and the outright outlawing of the despicable practice of fire and rehire. Can the Minister justify why workers should accept anything less from the Government?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):** Later this year, the hon. Gentleman will see an effective code that will penalise the most egregious cases of fire and rehire and hit those companies in the pocket. That is an effective way of banning those egregious situations without disallowing the flexibility that some employers need in times of trouble.

T6. [900412] **Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will know as well as I do that Milton Keynes has a rich history of science and innovation that goes well beyond me banging on about robots in this place. I was pleased to see the historic settlement for the UK Research and Innovation fund last month. Does my hon. Friend agree that places such as Milton Keynes with such a history of innovation should get a fair share of that funding?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman):** Milton Keynes has been slowly becoming a globally recognised

innovation hub on the Oxford-Cambridge arc, particularly on autonomous vehicles and with the connected places catapult. May I take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend and Milton Keynes on achieving city status as part of the jubilee celebrations? I assure him that our funding allocation mechanism is designed to support emerging clusters such as Milton Keynes.

T4. [900410] **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What is the Department doing, working with the Department of Health and Social Care, to improve the recovery of cancer trials and clinical research more broadly? Will the Minister meet me and Cancer Research UK to discuss how the rate of recovery can catch up with comparable countries post pandemic?

**George Freeman:** I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady. We have allocated £8 billion over the next three years for life science and medical research across the Medical Research Council, the National Institute for Health and Care Research, and all relevant agencies. We will launch a cancer mission shortly and I would be delighted to talk to her about it.

T7. [900413] **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): I declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary markets group. The “Love Your Local Market” campaign, supported by many Members across the House, has just come to an end. Does my hon. Friend agree that local markets and traders are a vital part of the local business community and make a huge economic contribution to the health of our high streets and the regeneration of our city and town centres?

**Paul Scully:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on his work and interest. We absolutely recognise the contribution that markets make to the vibrancy and diversity of our high streets up and down the country, and indeed of our town centres. We believe that local markets should stay at the heart of community life, and we want them to flourish all over the country.

T5. [900411] **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): Insect protein is likely to play a significant part in meeting the needs of the agri-food industry and it can certainly address some of the sector’s climate impacts, but it needs the right support. Brexit and supply chain issues have caused major chaos for the industry. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how to support the industry and, more importantly, how to protect the really highly skilled jobs it supports?

**George Freeman:** The insect protein industry is becoming increasingly important, given the need to nearly double global food supply in the next 20 or 30 years. I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman. It is one of the sectors we are looking at, as part of our £25 billion three-year allocation, that needs development and support.

T8. [900414] **Laura Farris** (Newbury) (Con): In a rural constituency like Newbury, fuel prices are a key driver of spiralling living costs. As such, it is a source of frustration that petrol stations are still failing to pass on the Treasury fuel duty cut. I know my right hon. Friend and his team have been working closely with the Competition and Markets Authority, but could he tell me what progress has been made to ensure that consumers are getting a fair deal at the pumps?

**Greg Hands:** We are engaging constantly to make sure that consumers are getting a fair deal. You would expect us to do so, Mr Speaker, after our 5p fuel reduction following 12 years of freezes and £5 billion of relief. It is vital that we see that saving being passed on to consumers. That is why my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary and I meet regularly with the sector and will continue to work closely with the CMA to analyse the workings of the market and make sure our constituents get those reductions.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): Exactly what steps is the Department taking to reduce the prohibitive bureaucracy facing scientists trying to access the very welcome £50 million funding for research into motor neurone disease, a horrifying disease that affects more than 5,000 people in this country? The research was announced in November last year, but they have faced those problems.

**George Freeman:** The hon. Lady makes an important point. We made a major announcement on MND research and will shortly be setting out our fully funded broader dementia and mental health missions. On research bureaucracy, we are looking, through the Professor Adam Tickell review, at how we can reduce administrative bureaucracy in the system so we are able to get those grants out much more quickly. I will happily talk her through that.

T9. [900415] **Mark Logan** (Bolton North East) (Con): Mr Speaker, would you believe it? Where I live in Westminster there is a lift that was made by the Bolton Gate Company 100 years ago and is still operating at the back end. Bolton Gate leads the door industry on the latest standards, but will the Minister outline what support we can provide to companies like Bolton Gate to navigate the new UK Conformity Assessed marking regulations, and to ensure that both Bolton Gate Company and its MP will be operating for another 100 years?

**Paul Scully:** As well as the Minister for product safety and standards, I am also the Minister for the hair and beauty sector, so can I thank my hon. Friend for supporting the sector with his new haircut? In all seriousness, we are taking a pragmatic approach to implementing the UKCA regime. We know the challenges that businesses have and we are committed to supporting businesses to adapt. We continue to work closely with industry to understand and resolve implementation challenges. We are also engaging extensively with the industry in the UK and around the world to explain our new requirements.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It was really interesting to hear the Secretary of State palm off the detail of the tax on electricity generators to the Chancellor, because the Chancellor could not answer many questions on that at the Treasury Committee yesterday, such as defining excess profits or saying exactly when it will start or what the impact would be on renewables generators in Scotland. Will he publish a full impact assessment on this policy and investment in the renewables sector in Scotland, which is a key sector in getting to net zero?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** I am very happy to speak to the hon. Lady about the details of that fiscal change. The energy profits levy was announced by the Chancellor and the

details will be worked out in consultation with us, but they are ultimately a responsibility for the Treasury. However, I am very happy to talk to her about those details.

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): Diesel and petrol prices have hit a record average high this morning, with diesel costing more than £1.85 a litre. Along with labour shortages, that is having a devastating impact on haulage businesses in North Shropshire and across the rest of the country, as well as driving inflation in the economy. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to support this critical industry through these dual crises?

**Greg Hands:** As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), we are engaging constantly with the sector and the CMA to make sure that the tax cut is passed on. However, I find it a bit rich for the Liberal Democrats, who, if I am not mistaken, voted against all the fuel freezes and this year's Budget, to then claim that the reduction in fuel duty, which they opposed, is now not being passed on to their constituents. If they had voted for the reduction in the first place, I would have a lot more sympathy with their position.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): We have been trying to find out today exactly what the Secretary of State's job is, because he kept saying "That is not my job". May I remind him that he is responsible for energy and that, in the recent energy strategy, energy from waste was hardly mentioned? It could produce 20% of our energy needs. Why is he ignoring that?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** I am always very pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman's contributions, given that he was born in my constituency—I am always pleased to see constituents doing extremely well in life. On my role, he is absolutely right that I am responsible for energy—I was Energy Minister and am now the Secretary of State—and that is why we have brought through the net zero strategy, which has plenty on energy from waste, including in relation to our energy needs.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): The recently published preliminary report by the administrators of the failed Safe Hands funeral plans company suggest that this is yet another instance in which company directors have made false promises to innocent people, taken their money, played fast and loose with it and are likely to have lost it all. Will the Minister give us a timetable for the various bits of legislation in the Queen's Speech so that dodgy company directors can be held to account immediately and not 10 or 15 years later?

**Paul Scully:** On corporate governance, we will see, in the economic crime Bill, the reviews relating to Companies House, and we have also had the Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Act 2021. However, the hon. Gentleman cites a particularly egregious example and I will make sure that my colleague Lord Callanan, the Minister responsible for corporate governance, responds accordingly.

# Opposition Day

[1ST ALLOTTED DAY]

## Standards in Public Life

**Mr Speaker:** Before we start the first debate, I remind the House again of the importance of good temper and moderation in our proceedings, as set out in “Erskine May”. “Erskine May” also makes it clear that it is not in order to accuse another Member of lying, unless the business under consideration is a distinct motion about the conduct of that Member. That is not the case today and any such accusations will not be tolerated.

12.33 pm

**Angela Rayner** (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the importance of the Ministerial Code for maintaining high standards in public life; endorses the Committee on Standards in Public Life report entitled *Upholding Standards in Public Life, Final report of the Standards Matter 2 review*; calls on the Government to implement all of the report’s recommendations as a matter of urgency; and further calls on the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to make a statement to the House on the progress made in implementing the recommendations by 20 July 2022, and each year subsequently.

It is always a pleasure to stand opposite the Paymaster General. In this House, we are proud of the constituents we represent, and I am no different: from Droylsden school to St Peter’s and St Mary’s, from our town team to Tameside markets, Ashton-under-Lyne did our country proud this weekend. I am proud of our British values and the community that I come from—we all are—but the conduct of this Prime Minister undermines those values: rigging the rules that he himself is under investigation for breaching, downgrading standards and debasing the principles of public life before our very eyes.

There is nothing decent about the way the Prime Minister has acted. What example does he set? This Prime Minister’s example of leadership is illegally proroguing Parliament, breeding a Downing Street culture in which his staff and he himself felt able to break lockdown rules, and putting the very standards that underpin our democracy into the shredder.

The Prime Minister promised a new ministerial code in April of last year. It has taken him 13 months—13 months of sleaze, shame and scandal—and what has he come up with? In the very week that the Sue Gray report laid bare the rotten culture at the heart of Downing Street, the rule breaking on an industrial scale and the demeaning of the pillars of our great democracy, the Prime Minister made his choice—and what did he decide? Not to strengthen standards, but to lower the bar.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The right hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that, when faced with a rogue Prime Minister, a mere adviser on the ministerial code is dangerously inadequate? We must have an independent enforcer. So long as this unfit PM retains the ability to override his own adviser on the finding of a breach, the adviser—in the words of the chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life—is left “critically undermined”.

**Angela Rayner:** The hon. Lady makes a crucial point that shows why the Opposition tabled the motion today.

The bar has been lowered. Honesty, integrity, accountability, transparency, leadership in the public interest: these are the values that once cloaked the ministerial code, but to this Prime Minister they are just words. Not only that, but they are disposable words that the Prime Minister has now dispensed with, deleting them from his own contribution and airbrushing them from history—and that is just the foreword. More horrors lurk beyond.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that, when the Prime Minister says that he wants to reset the culture of Downing Street, all he wants to do is reset the rules?

**Angela Rayner:** Actions speak louder than words, and my hon. Friend hits on the point that the actions of this Prime Minister have debased the rules, have brought shame on Parliament and on the office of the Prime Minister, which is an absolute privilege, and have lost the trust of much of the public. The Prime Minister boasts about his victory in 2019, but he has now squandered all that good will with his behaviour. While people were locked down and unable to see their loved ones, cleaners were having to clean sick off the floor and wine off the walls as others were partying on down in Downing Street.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Has she had the same experience that I had this weekend when I was out meeting constituents celebrating the jubilee? They were absolutely disgusted—particularly those who are not traditional Labour supporters—by the behaviour of the Prime Minister. They feel that he is not only letting them down, but letting our country and its reputation down.

**Angela Rayner:** I absolutely agree. I have heard Ministers talking in the media in the past 24 hours about how we must draw a line and we must move on, but many people in this country cannot draw a line and cannot move on while this Prime Minister is in office, because it triggers what they experienced and the trauma that their families faced during the crisis.

**Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for making such a powerful speech. Does she agree that the Prime Minister’s rule breaking is absolutely despicable and that he should be tendering his resignation instead of weakening the ministerial code?

**Angela Rayner:** I absolutely agree. There is an important point here, because I have heard Ministers in the media saying that we have to move on and that there are important issues that we have to face. But while the Labour party has been putting forward proposals for dealing with the cost of living crisis, bringing down NHS waiting lists, as Labour did in government, and looking at the transport chaos in which this Government have left us, the Government have not been dealing with the issues that matter to the people. They have been running around the Prime Minister trying to save his neck and justify an unjustifiable example of lawbreaking.

**Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con): The right hon. Lady has just suggested—and the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) made the same point—that the Prime Minister has weakened the ministerial code. Is she aware of last week’s report from the Institute for Government, which said that the code had not been weakened, that “confected” accusations had been made to that effect, and that Opposition Members should therefore correct the record? Will she do that?

**Angela Rayner:** I am glad that the hon. Member has mentioned this. I shall say more about it later. What the Prime Minister chose to do—as the Institute for Government has recognised—was cherry-pick parts of the recommendations rather than taking them in their entirety. The chair of the committee said that it was important for the recommendations to be taken as a whole and not cherry-picked, so I respectfully disagree with the hon. Member. I do not think that this strengthened the ministerial code, and I think that what the Prime Minister did constitutes a missed opportunity. What he has tried to do is get away with weakening the ministerial code so that he can say, “I have given an apology, and I think that that is the right way to go about it.”

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Lady and her colleagues on securing the debate. She has mentioned the unlawful Prorogation of Parliament. This Parliament failed to hold the Prime Minister to account after that unlawful Prorogation, which meant that he was able to continue his cavalier attitude to the law and, now, the ministerial code. Does she agree that it is vital for Parliament to find a way to get rid of the Prime Minister, as his party is clearly unable to do so expeditiously?

**Angela Rayner:** I entirely agree with the hon. and learned Lady. It is important to note that this Prime Minister has a long history and a long-standing pattern of behaviour that render him unfit for prime ministerial office. Since he had the privilege of becoming Prime Minister, all he has demonstrated is that he was not worthy of that office, and he will never change his behaviour. Conservative Members need to understand that, because he is dragging the Conservative party down. It has been suggested to me many times by the media that that may be a good thing for the Labour party. Well, it is not a good thing for the Labour party, and it is not a good thing for the country to have a Prime Minister who acts in a reckless way and does not believe that the law applies to him.

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has hit on an important point about the status and importance of the Prime Minister’s office. During the time that I have been interested in politics, there have been four Conservative Prime Ministers—Mrs Thatcher, John Major, David Cameron, and the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May)—all of whom I disagreed with politically, but none of whom remotely besmirched the position of Prime Minister and denigrated our politics in the way that this one has.

**Angela Rayner:** That too is an important point. The opposition to the Prime Minister comes from many different walks of political life—from his own Back Benches, from some of his predecessors, and, obviously,

from Members on these Benches. This is not really a political issue; it is more about the question of what our democracy stands for. If we do not draw a line in relation to these standards and ensure that we hold to them, the public will have a mistrust of politicians, and that is damaging for everyone, not just Conservative Members.

**Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend has talked about the ministerial code, but let us also consider just three of the Nolan principles: honesty, integrity and openness. We know that there are people in much lower offices in public service who adhere to those principles without question and without problems. Does my right hon. Friend find it regrettable that the Prime Minister does not?

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Not only does the Prime Minister not adhere to those principles; he deleted them from his own foreword to the ministerial code, which is pretty unbelievable.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): One way of moving on would be a public inquiry. Many commitments have been made to such an inquiry, but we have yet to be given a date. Is it not important for everyone who has lost loved ones—the 160,000 people who have died in the United Kingdom, including 4,000 who have died in Northern Ireland—to have an input, to ask questions and receive answers, so that they can move on?

**Angela Rayner:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I vividly remember the contributions he made as part of that debate and the way in which he passionately put forward what the public have been through and how they felt about that. That is why I say that the public are not ready to move on. While the Prime Minister remains in office, I do not think the public will ever move on from what they have been through, because it was a very traumatic time. There is not a family in the UK that was not affected by the pandemic, and every time a Minister tells the public to move on, all it does is make them more upset and angry. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Coming back to the ministerial code, this is not just about the foreword. Far from adopting the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life in a report that the Prime Minister did not even have the decency to respond to, the truth is that he cherry-picked the recommendations that suited him and discarded those he found inconvenient. Lord Evans, the chair of the committee, has said that the recommendations, which form the basis of this Opposition day debate today, were “designed as a package”. By casting aside cross-party proposals, the Prime Minister is trying to rig the rules and downgrade standards.

Let us take the introduction of tiered sanctions. That proposal is meaningful only if independence is granted to the adviser to open investigations. Without that, it is left to the whim of the Prime Minister. Lord Evans described these two changes as

“part of a mutually dependent package of reforms, designed to be taken together”.

As the Institute for Government says, the Prime Minister’s changes do not increase the adviser’s independence at all. In fact, the net effect of the changes is to weaken

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standards and concentrate power in his own hands. While the adviser on standards may have been granted a swanky new website and an office, he still fundamentally requires the Prime Minister's permission to launch any investigation, making the Prime Minister the judge and jury in his very own personal courtroom. It is no wonder his own standards adviser has criticised him for his low ambition on standards.

The adviser was joined last week by Lord Evans, the chair of the committee, who outlined the dangers of cherry-picking changes to the ministerial code. While the Prime Minister maintains the power of veto over the independent adviser, there is an inherent risk that he will overrule his own adviser or tell him, "There's nothing to see here. Now be a good chap and move on." Well, we are not moving on when he is dragging our democracy into the gutter. Without having independence baked into the standards system, this new code flatters to deceive.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is extraordinary not only that the Prime Minister can refuse permission for an investigation to be undertaken but that there is no obligation on him to explain why. I am sure the right hon. Lady will agree that, in the circumstances, it is no surprise that more and more people are losing faith in the parliamentary system *per se*, and that we in Wales are therefore truly questioning whether we cannot do this better for ourselves.

**Angela Rayner:** The hon. Member makes her point, but I think we are better together. The actions of the Prime Minister do not represent the United Kingdom, which is why I am bringing this motion before the House today.

The new code is also utterly silent on the question of what amounts to a major breach of the rules, so what happens to a Minister who engages in bribery, who perpetrates sexual assault or who bullies their staff? It is the Prime Minister who continues to appoint himself as the judge and jury on ministerial misconduct, including his own. It is he who decides the degree of wrongdoing or rule breaking. You could not make it up, but that is exactly what he is proposing to do. This is the same Prime Minister who became the first in history to have broken the law in office. Now, what is to stop him saying that some sort of an apology is enough?

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I wonder if my right hon. Friend has had an opportunity to read Lord Geidt's most recent report on the ministerial code, in which he says:

"I have attempted to avoid the Independent Adviser"—  
that is Lord Geidt himself—

"offering advice to a Prime Minister about a Prime Minister's obligations under his own Ministerial Code. If a Prime Minister's judgement is that there is nothing to investigate or no case to answer, he would be bound to reject any such advice, thus forcing the resignation of the Independent Adviser"—

rather than that of the Prime Minister, obviously.

"Such a circular process could only risk placing the Ministerial Code in a place of ridicule."

Is that not basically where we are—a place of ridicule?

**Angela Rayner:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We need look no further than the Prime Minister's response when it was revealed that the Home Secretary has been bullying her staff. He threw a protective ring around her, pardoning bullying in the workplace and forcing the resignation of his widely respected independent adviser.

Another protective ring was assembled for the former Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who unlawfully tried to save a Tory donor from a £40 million tax bill on a huge property deal. The former Health Secretary's sister was handed lucrative NHS contracts while a protective ring was denied to care homes up and down this country, leaving residents and staff locked down and terrified as covid swept through the country. It is one rule for them and another rule for the rest of us.

In fact, the only specified sanction in the new ministerial code is for deliberately misleading Parliament. It is right that the sanction for misleading Parliament remains resignation, which is a long-established principle, yet the Prime Minister is still in his place. He remains in his position, clinging on to office and degrading that principle a little more each day. This Prime Minister should be long gone but, despite the majority of his Back Benchers telling him to get on his bike, he cannot take the hint.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life made numerous recommendations, including a proposal to end the revolving door that allowed the Greensill scandal to occur, but they have all been ignored by the Prime Minister. The Advisory Committee on Business Appointments was already a toothless watchdog, but under this Government it has been muzzled and neutered. Forget the revolving door, we have a system in which the door is held wide open for former Ministers who want to line their pockets as soon as they leave office.

ACOPA used to have the power to issue lobbying bans of up to five years for rule breaking, but as the Committee on Standards in Public Life said,

"The lack of any meaningful sanctions for a breach of the rules is no longer sustainable."

ACOPA should be given meaningful powers, making its decisions directly binding rather than mere recommendations. We must put a stop to the current provision in the governance code for Ministers that enables them to go ahead and appoint candidates who have been deemed inappropriate by an assessment panel.

Urgent reform is required to the process of making appointments in public life, with a stronger guarantee of independence. A number of direct ministerial appointments are entirely unregulated, which must change. Labour supports the proposal of the Committee on Standards in Public Life to create an obligation in primary legislation for the Prime Minister to publish the ministerial code and to grant it a more appropriate constitutional status. I hope the Minister will take note. There is a precedent, as the codes of conduct for the civil service, for special advisers and for the diplomatic service are all on a statutory footing to ensure serious offences are properly investigated. I am sure he would agree it is only right that holders of public office are held to the same standard.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** In the early days of Nolan, I was an independent assessor of public appointments, which was a role I took very seriously. Has my right hon.



Friend noticed the trend in many public appointments to pack the panel with people with a particular political direction? In one case, a sacked special adviser with limited experience was on a panel for an important role.

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She does tremendous work on the Public Accounts Committee, deep diving into some of these issues.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life concluded that the current system of transparency on lobbying is not fit for purpose. There is cross-party agreement that change is needed to update our system and strengthen standards in public life. Those standards are being chipped away day by day. It is time to rebuild, repair and restore public trust in our politics.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life has a pre-written, some might say “oven ready,” package of solutions, so let us get it done. After a decade of inaction by this Government, Britain is lagging behind the curve compared with our allies when it comes to ethical standards in government. President Biden has committed to setting up a commission on federal ethics, a single Government agency with the power to oversee and enforce federal anti-corruption laws. The Australian Labour party, which is now in government, has plans for a Commonwealth integrity commission that will have powers to investigate public corruption. In Canada, the ethics commissioner enforces breaches of the law covering public office holders.

Far from keeping up with our global partners, this Government have allowed standards in Britain to wither on the vine. The Government greeted the report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life with complete silence back in November. When the Prime Minister finally got around to updating the ministerial code 10 days ago, he cherry-picked the bits he liked from the report, completely undermining its aim.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Is my right hon. Friend as concerned as I am about the refusal of the Prime Minister and other Ministers to allow senior civil servants to come to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee? We have now asked Sue Gray three times to attend our Greensill inquiry, and she has been blocked by the Prime Minister and other Ministers, as have other senior civil servants. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is another form of preventing Parliament from holding the Executive up to scrutiny?

**Angela Rayner:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It says a lot about the Prime Minister, as I have outlined in my speech, that he has no regard for transparency. When Labour was last in government, we legislated to clean up politics with the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, the Electoral Commission, the Freedom of Information Act and the ministerial code. The last Labour Government did not hesitate to act decisively to clean up Britain’s public life, and Labour’s independent integrity and ethics commission will bring the current farce to an end and clean up politics.

Three decades ago, a Labour Opposition exposed the sleaze engulfing and decaying a Tory Government, and we legislated for it. Over the past 12 years of this Tory Government, the strong standards we set have been chipped away. Our unwritten constitution is dependent

on so-called “good chaps”. We trust our political leaders to do the right thing, but that theory has been ripped to shreds under this Government. No amount of convention or legislation appears capable of stopping this Prime Minister riding roughshod over our democracy.

The next Labour Government will act to stamp out the corruption that has run rife under this Prime Minister. Labour’s ethics commission will bring the existing committees and bodies that oversee standards in government into a single independent body that is removed from politicians. It will have powers to launch investigations without ministerial approval, to collect evidence and to decide sanctions.

Honesty matters, integrity matters and decency matters. We should be ambitious for high standards, and we should all be accountable: no more Ministers breaking the rules and getting away with it; no more revolving door between ministerial office and lobbying jobs; no more corruption and waste of taxpayers’ money; and no more Members of Parliament paid to lobby their own Government.

Labour has a plan to restore standards in public life and to clean up politics, but we have to start somewhere. We have to stop the rot. Labour’s motion would see the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life adopted in full right now, which is a crucial first step. The committee was established by Sir John Major nearly three decades ago to advise the Prime Minister on ethical standards in public life, and it has promoted the seven principles of public life—the Nolan principles.

The mission of the Committee on Standards in Public Life has never been more important than it is today. It is genuinely independent and genuinely cross-party, and it has done all the work. The plans are in place, ready to go. On the Opposition Benches, we back the Committee on Standards in Public Life. All we need now is a nod from the Minister and the Government, which they could do today by passing this motion. I hope the Minister gives in this time.

**Chris Bryant:** Another Committee—the Committee on Standards, which is also cross-party—has produced a report. It has suggested that because one of the important principles is openness, the rule for Ministers on when and how they register hospitality should not be separate from that for the rest of Members. Will the Labour party be supporting those changes, to make sure that everybody in the House is treated equally when they are brought forward to the House?

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right: what the Labour party is promoting and what we want to see is transparency. We did that and demonstrated that under the last Labour Government, and we will continue to do that. Under this Government, we have seen time and again an erosion of that transparency, that right to freedom of information and that conduct in terms of how we report how donations are made and so on, with them trying to get around the rules. That is why we have proposed the independent ethics commission, because we think it is an important step in cleaning up some of the problems we face today.

This Prime Minister has tested our unwritten constitution to its limit, but today all Members of this House have their own choice to make. As Sir John Major said of the Committee in his foreword to this latest report,

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“The Committee will never be redundant. A minority will evade or misinterpret the rules of proper behaviour. The rules will always need regular updating to meet changing expectations in many areas”.

As Lord Evans said, without reform to the systems that uphold and protect standards in public life, the Prime Minister’s recent changes

“will not restore public trust in ethical standards at the heart of government. Instead, suspicion about the way in which the Ministerial Code is administered will linger”.

Conservative Members must now ask themselves the question: will they back the package of recommendations proposed by the Committee on Standards in Public Life or will they turn their backs to save the skin of a rogue Prime Minister—one who is already haemorrhaging support from his own side? Those who reject these cross-party proposals will be complicit. They will be propping up a Prime Minister intent on dragging everyone and everything down with him. Today, all of us have a choice—we have a chance to draw the line in the sand and say, “Enough is enough!”

We urge Members to vote to defend the principles of public life, to back high standards and to clean up politics. It is time to stop the rot, and I commend this motion to the House.

1.2 pm

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis):** I thank the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) for choosing today’s motion. We have been on opposite sides one or two times in the past few months, and it is always a pleasure, but I have no hesitation in supporting the motion on the Order Paper today.

The Government fully recognise the importance of the ministerial code and its role in maintaining standards in public life—that is not questioned. It was, of course, a Conservative Prime Minister who created the code, which sets out the Prime Minister’s expectations for his or her Ministers, detailing the standards of conduct expected of those who serve Government and the principles that underpin those standards. The code has performed that role for successive Prime Ministers since, as I say, it was first published by Sir John Major as “Questions of Procedure for Ministers” 30 years ago, in 1992.

Throughout that time, the code has been an evolving document. It is customarily issued, as the House will know, where warranted and then reissued by the Prime Minister of the day to reflect changes, and to update the guidance and principles that apply to Ministers. It is because of the importance of the ministerial code that the Prime Minister has recently revised and strengthened it. It is, frankly, fake news to say, as some have, that it has been weakened—the exact opposite: it has been strengthened, and I will explain why.

In doing this, the Prime Minister has unambiguously drawn on the advice of both the independent adviser on ministerial interests and the Committee on Standards in Public Life. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the independent adviser for all his work advising the Prime Minister since he was appointed a little over a year ago. I would, of course, also like to thank the Committee on Standards in Public Life, not just for its “Upholding Standards in Public Life” report of last November, but for fulfilling the important role that it

has done for over 25 years: advising the Prime Minister of the day on the arrangements in place to uphold standards in public life.

I would like to talk about the changes that have been made; to clarify some of the confusion and misinformation that has been circulating in relation to them; and to set out to right hon. and hon. Members why decisions about how the ministerial code evolves are, rightly and constitutionally, ones for the Prime Minister of the day.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Michael Ellis:** I will make a little progress, but I will be giving way later. Let me start by saying that the changes made to the ministerial code in this iteration and to the role of the independent adviser, published on 27 May, represent the most substantial strengthening of the role of the independent adviser since the establishment of that post in 2006. To be clear, those changes include: revised terms of reference for the independent adviser; introducing an enhanced process for the initiation of investigations; more specific references in the ministerial code to the role of the independent adviser; more specific references to the duty on Ministers to provide the independent adviser with all information reasonably necessary for the discharge of his functions; new detail on proportionate sanctions for a breach of the code, as agreed by the Prime Minister in April 2021, in line with the recommendation of the Committee on Standards in Public Life; the change whereby the independent adviser will in future be consulted about revisions to the code, as, again, recommended by the Committee on Standards in Public Life; and changes to further enhance the independence of the independent adviser’s office, through providing it with its own gov.uk page and responsibility for managing its own affairs and its own correspondence.

In all those ways and in more, the role has been strengthened. [Interruption.] It is not just a new website; it is the control of staff, the control of correspondence, the right to be consulted about future revisions, the creation of proportionate standards and the specific references to Ministers. It is much stronger than it was before.

**Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP):** I am interested in what the Minister said in his opening remarks about supporting the terms of the motion. It

“calls on the Government to implement all of the report’s recommendations”

in the “Standards Matter 2” review

“as a matter of urgency”.

Notwithstanding what the Minister just said, is he now confirming to the House that the Government will implement all of those recommendations, as the motion calls for?

**Michael Ellis:** The hon. Gentleman should be patient and wait to see. What is important is that, collectively, these revisions represent a substantial and significant evolution. Importantly, as I have said, they reflect the thinking, over time, of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. It is not as though this has been magicked up somewhere else; this is reflective of what the committee has asked for—and the independent adviser. The Government are alert to those recommendations made by those in the standards landscape. We regard those recommendations as important and worthy of careful consideration.

**Margaret Beckett** (Derby South) (Lab): I am speaking as a member of the Committee on Standards in Public Life but not on behalf of that committee, as that is the job of the chair only. I simply observe to the Minister that there is a fatal flaw in the observations he has just made about the greater degree of freedom to be given to the independent adviser, because everything still depends, fundamentally, on the decision of the Prime Minister in office.

**Michael Ellis:** As it should, constitutionally. The reality is, as I think the right hon. Lady will confirm, that this does strengthen the position—certainly it does not weaken it. The Committee on Standards in Public Life first made recommendations on the ministerial code and the role of the independent adviser on 15 April 2021, prior to the appointment of Lord Geidt later that same month. At that time, or roughly at the same time, Lord Evans called for greater independence for the independent adviser in the initiation of investigations and publication of findings; and for there to be a “proportionate range of sanctions” available for breaches of the code.

That is not unreasonable. It is perfectly reasonable to have a proportionate availability—a range of options—for someone who has been found to be in breach of the code, just as this House has when Members of Parliament are found to be in breach of the standards expected of this House and just as a military court martial or court of law would have. Currently, the ministerial code does not allow for that range of options, so punishments can be disproportionate.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman always comes to the Dispatch Box and eruditely dances on a pinhead to justify his paymaster. Fundamentally, the difference is that when my party was in government, Ministers were sacked for lesser things than have been done recently, because the Prime Ministers of the day had regard to the standards in public life and had no truck with anyone who crossed the line. That is surely the difference in respect of what we all want to see—and, actually, given what we can see on the Government Benches, what a lot of the Minister’s party would like to see.

**Michael Ellis:** I understand the hon. Lady’s wish to paint her party’s former leaders as paragons of virtue, but the important thing—the test—is whether a Minister retains the confidence of the Prime Minister of the day, whether that be a Labour or Conservative Prime Minister.

The Government acted on the recommendations last year. In a letter to Lord Evans on 28 April 2021, the Prime Minister set out the commitment to improving the independence of the investigations process; to providing guarantees of timely publication; and to directly implementing the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life on graduated sanctions, the independent adviser’s non-renewable term and his secretariat support. All those things strengthen the independent adviser rather than weaken him.

The committee then made further recommendations on the ministerial code and the independent adviser in its report of November last year. The Government considered those recommendations and consulted the noble Lord Geidt, before publishing their policy statement on the ministerial code and the adviser on 27 May.

**Mr Perkins:** The Minister’s response a few moments ago was incredibly telling. For all the talk about independence and standards, did he not hit the nail on the head when he said it depends on whether the Prime Minister retains confidence in a Minister? This is not any kind of independent process; it is simply about who the Prime Minister favours and who he does not.

**Michael Ellis:** Not at all. There is a constitutional imperative that the Prime Minister of the day, no matter what party he or she is from, must have the right to select their Ministers and must have confidence in their Ministers. That is a constitutional imperative and it is not inconsistent with the code and the independent adviser’s wishes.

Let me rest for a moment on the change that has been made in respect of sanctions, because it exemplifies the point about the Government’s considering and responding to the recommendations of others. It has always been the case, under successive Administrations, that a range of potential outcomes are available when it is determined that an aspect of the code has been broken. Some examples have been cited from previous Administrations. Members need only cast their minds back to the case of Baroness Scotland in 2009, who apologised for unknowingly employing an illegal worker and paid the associated civil penalty of £5,000, but when then Prime Minister Gordon Brown concluded that no further action was necessary, he made that determination of his own volition.

In the interests of fairness, I could equally well mention the 2012 investigation into Baroness Sayeeda Warsi under the coalition Government, or the current independent adviser’s finding that my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) made a technical breach of the code in failing to declare that his sister’s company had become an approved supplier to the NHS.

The test of whether a Minister remains in office has always been the continued confidence of the Prime Minister, so I am not going to criticise previous Labour Prime Ministers for making that determination, and nor would I criticise anyone in that position. They have a difficult office to fulfil and they must make a determination. If a breach of the code is extremely minor in the eyes of most but the Prime Minister has lost confidence in the Minister in question, that will be it for that Minister. That is the way it has to work.

That is the test of whether a Minister remains, yet over time a false impression has grown that any breach, large or small, across a wide-ranging, detailed document of 26 pages, must result in resignation. Correcting that false impression has been a concern not just for the Government but for those who advise on ethics in government. In its “Upholding Standards in Public Life” report, the Committee on Standards in Public Life noted:

“No other area of public life has such a binary system of sanctions, and in both Parliament and the Civil Service there are a range of sanctions available according to the seriousness of the offence. There is no reason why this should not be the case for ministers.”

**Chris Bryant:** The ministerial code says:

“It is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity.”

I am sure the Minister agrees with that—“paramount importance”. The Prime Minister has now said nine times in the House that the level of unemployment is

[Chris Bryant]

lower now than it was before the pandemic. That is untrue. The Prime Minister accepts it is untrue: he was asked about it by one of the members of the Liaison Committee and said, “Yes, but I have corrected the record.” Unfortunately, he has not corrected the record, and he has not even corrected the record about not having corrected the record yet. Does that not mean the code should say:

“Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister”—  
unless it is the Prime Minister?

**Michael Ellis:** If I may say so, that is a rather poor example to cite, because what the Prime Minister is doing is emphasising the fact that unemployment in this country is lower now than it has been for generations. [Interruption.]

Until—[Interruption.] Can I carry on? Until now, the code has been silent on the specific consequences for breaches, apart from in some defined instances. The code sets out that knowingly misleading this House is a breach of the code for which resignation is expected. The code still says that—it is stated in paragraph 1.3.c, not one word of which has changed—but now it also includes more detail on other possible sanctions. In particular, it makes mention of a public apology, remedial action or the removal of ministerial salary for a period—again, something that this House can also sanction in certain circumstances. I do not know whether Members are arguing to the contrary.

**Liz Saville Roberts:** To what degree does the Minister agree that truth matters, regardless of the sanctions? We have been talking about a lot of the details, but Plaid Cymru and I have brought forward legislation to make lying in politics illegal, because that would fundamentally show to this place that the truth matters. Does the Minister agree with me in that respect?

**Michael Ellis:** Of course I agree that the truth is an important and paramount object in public life. That goes without saying. Sanctions are another matter. This is a question of fact and degree in each individual case. The right hon. Lady is pursuing this line that somehow truth has been removed from this iteration of the ministerial code. It has not—it is still there at paragraph 1.3.c—so she is pursuing an imaginary problem.

Let me turn to the letter on the application of the ministerial code to the Prime Minister. Before I talk about the detail of the letter, it is important that I touch on the recent communication between the Prime Minister and the independent adviser in relation to the fixed penalty notice received by the Prime Minister and the application of the ministerial code.

**Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab):** Before the Minister does that, will he give way?

**Michael Ellis:** I am giving way quite frequently, but I will give way to the right hon. Lady.

**Valerie Vaz:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he say what the position is if the Prime Minister has broken the law? Does he accept that that is a breach of the ministerial code?

**Michael Ellis:** I am not going to get into individual examples; it would not be appropriate for me to do so. On 31 May, the Prime Minister wrote to the independent adviser making it clear that the standards and expectations set out in the ministerial code apply equally to his conduct as they do to all Ministers. I hope that answers the question—the Prime Minister put that in his letter. In that letter, the Prime Minister reiterated his apology in relation to the gathering that took place on 19 June 2020, for which he received a fixed penalty notice. The Prime Minister acknowledged the independent adviser’s frustration that this had not been made explicit at an earlier point. He set out in detail his judgment of his own conduct—to be fair to him—in respect of the ministerial code, which had included consideration of: precedents of Ministers who have unwittingly breached regulation where there was no intent to break the law; his full accountability to Parliament and the British people to whom he has rightly and repeatedly apologised; and his correction of the parliamentary record in relation to past statements, alongside his following of the principles of leadership and accountability in doing so.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Michael Ellis:** I will give way in a moment. I must get through my remarks.

Let me return to the reforms that have been introduced. It is the role of the independent adviser to provide the Prime Minister with independent advice on whether a Minister’s conduct has met the standards set out in the code, as well as providing independent, impartial advice to Ministers on the management of their interests. The role is an advisory one. In the event that an allegation of a breach of the code is referred to the independent adviser, his task is to investigate and, following that investigation, to give his independent advice to the Prime Minister in order that the Prime Minister may then reach a decision. Those decisions are taken by the Prime Minister—constitutionally it is essential that they are taken by the Prime Minister—in line with his democratic accountability for such decisions. The Prime Minister has the democratic accountability—the elected authority—and advisers and officials do not.

**John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con):** May I take my right hon. and learned Friend back to the Prime Minister’s response to the independent adviser—the letter that he mentioned that was published on 31 May? He is right to say that it goes through in some detail and with great care—rightly—the question of fixed penalty notices being issued and sets out the Prime Minister’s position for all of us here to know, to understand and to debate. The thing that it does not cover, and which in my view, I am afraid, is a very serious omission, is the further charge in the Sue Gray report that there have been serious failings of leadership at the top of No.10 and the Cabinet Office—both the Prime Minister and the civil service leadership. Because it is about leadership, which is one of the fundamental seven Nolan principles of integrity in public life, does that not also involve a serious and material breach of one of the fundamental underpinnings of the ministerial code, and is it also not a problem that he has managed to ignore that entire section of the report, gloss over it and fail to address it and to address it publicly?

**Michael Ellis:** I respectfully disagree with my hon. Friend for the simple reason that there is the issue of inadvertence. That is a relevant factor. As someone who

has been involved in the law for many years, I think that one should take the approach of accepting that there is a difference between inadvertence and deliberate conduct.

The initiation of investigations by the independent adviser has been subject to much comment. I assure hon. Members that the Government have considered the range of views on this carefully. The revised terms of reference set out an enhanced process to allow for the independent adviser now to independently initiate an investigation, having consulted the Prime Minister and obtained his consent—[*Interruption.*] That is an improvement on what was the case before. It is also stated in the new iteration that the Prime Minister would normally provide that consent. I note here that Lord Evans has made it clear that the introduction of a range of graduated sanctions means that the independent adviser should be given the full authority to independently initiate investigations, and that these recommendations were part of the package. The Government have considered that carefully. While they take this view seriously, please allow me to lay out why we consider it critical that the Prime Minister retains a role in the initiation of investigations. [*Interruption.*] Because this is a constitutional imperative. The Prime Minister is head of Her Majesty's Government and is accountable for the conduct of the Executive. That authority and that accountability derives from the Prime Minister's ability to command the confidence of this House, and that derives from the Members of this House, including those who hold office—all of us—at the behest of the electorate. This Government are committed to maintaining that constitutional position and the accountability of the Prime Minister, including in decisions. If we usurp that and hand that authority to someone who does not have electoral accountability, that would be a constitutional irregularity. To hand such decisions to another appointed individual without a check or a balance would be to undermine that position fundamentally.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): Has not the Minister just got to the heart of the problem? It is precisely because the Prime Minister is the ultimate arbiter of the code that the holder of the position of Prime Minister has a particular obligation to act with integrity. The problem that we have here is that there is a growing lack of confidence in the Prime Minister's integrity—we saw that last night—and the longer he clings on, the more he undermines the office that he holds and, indeed, undermines our democracy.

**Michael Ellis:** I respectfully disagree with the right hon. Gentleman. The Prime Minister enhances the role of his office. [*Interruption.*] The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The Conservative party had, proportionately, the largest electoral victory since 1979—it speaks for itself. The Prime Minister has secured the electoral support of the largest number of people in this country for many years.

The ministerial code makes it clear that the Prime Minister will normally agree to an investigation, and that, in the unlikely scenario that the Prime Minister does not agree to an investigation, the independent adviser can then request that the reasons for not doing so are published. There is, therefore, a check on the Prime Minister's power to refuse consent for an investigation. The reasons would have to be published and they would have to be clear. Those are important improvements in independence and transparency.

Lord Geidt is clear that this is a “workable scheme”. The Government are also clear that this is a scheme that upholds the constitutional position. I would add that Lord Evans, in writing to Lord True in response to the Government policy statement, stated that the new process for initiating investigations

“represents an improvement in the process for regulating the Code, which we welcome.”

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Minister seeks to justify the Government's position by tying it back to the principle of parliamentary privilege, as if that is somehow an absolute and inviolable principle. But it is a principle that we in recent years have watered down in relation to the creation of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and now the Independent Complaints and Grievance Service. This is not any more the trump card that it used to be. If this House is to be subject to independent investigation as Members, why should the Prime Minister and his Ministers be treated differently?

**Michael Ellis:** There is the Executive, the judiciary and the legislature, and there are different arrangements for the three branches. One would not expect anything contrary to that.

Let me touch on the relationship. The Government greatly value the work of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, but as the careful balancing of the powers around the initiation of investigation demonstrates, we consider it right that the Government assess recommendations on their individual merits. This work takes time and involves testing the strengths and weakness of proposals and options to develop a workable response. This is as true for the recommendations made in relation to the ministerial code as it is for the other areas covered in the extensive report issued by the CSPL just over six months ago. We have said that the Government are carefully considering those and other recommendations, and that is precisely the work that is taking place. The report was extensive, and the work to consider it is as extensive. I assure the House that the Government will respond to the Committee's other recommendations in due course. The Government are happy to update the House via an appropriate statement when doing so.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Let me go back to the fact that the Prime Minister can say no to the initiation of an independent investigation. What happens if the independent investigator asks the Prime Minister to publish his reasons? Is the Prime Minister compelled to do that? Similarly, given that the Prime Minister has said all along that no rules were broken, what is to stop him breaking rules in the future and saying, “No, we don't need an investigation because I can assure you that no rules have been broken.”? Where are the checks and balances there?

**Michael Ellis:** The check and balance is that the Prime Minister would have to say in writing, I think, that he will find that—[*Interruption.*] I have answered that point. There would have to be some indication in writing of why he has advised the independent adviser not to proceed.

Moving on, the motion calls for the Government “to make a statement to the House on the progress made in implementing the recommendations”

[Michael Ellis]

of the CSPL on 20 July and every 20 July thereafter. I stress that the issues that we are debating today are complex and intricately interwoven with our constitution. I hope that hon. Members would agree that the recommendations made in this area are particularly worthy of thoughtful consideration. There will inevitably be some that we do not agree with, but surely it is better to do that than to rush into reporting on changes, under an arbitrary timetable dictated by the Opposition. While careful consideration will be given to changes, the Government remain committed to being here not once a year, but every day, to account for their performance on standards to this House and to the British public.

**Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

**Michael Ellis:** I will give way before I finish, but I want to highlight again that the changes to the ministerial code, and the terms of reference for the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests, are a positive step forward. They signal a greater and more clearly defined role for the independent adviser, alongside a proportionate approach to breaches of the code. They are made in response to the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life and others, and following consultation with the independent adviser, for whom, I must add, I and Her Majesty's Government generally have the greatest respect. We are very conscious of the work he does, and are honoured to have him as a public servant. I particularly emphasise that point.

**Christian Wakeford:** The Minister very frequently defends the indefensible in this Chamber when many of his colleagues come to the conclusion that they cannot. He talked about a binary choice, but the binary choice is between what is right and what is wrong. My four-year-old daughter gets that; why do the Minister and the Prime Minister not?

**Michael Ellis:** The Prime Minister understands full well when wrong has been done, and he has apologised repeatedly. The quality of mercy is also an important one.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The Paymaster General has been here on many occasions defending the Prime Minister's position on issues relating to, for want of a better term, partygate. He has repeated the lines of the Prime Minister and the Government on what happened and did not happen on those occasions. Is he satisfied with the information he is being supplied with, and that he has not been led to inadvertently mislead Parliament with his statements defending the Government's position?

**Michael Ellis:** It goes without saying that I would not appear at this Dispatch Box if I were otherwise than satisfied—more than satisfied—that the information I am given is correct.

The House will agree that we all wish to apply the highest standards in our role. We are none of us perfect, but we come here with a view to serving our constituents and the general public. The Prime Minister does that; we all do that, on both sides of the House, and we do our best, but we are not immune to mistakes and occasional errors. What is most important is how we

deal with them afterwards. There, the Prime Minister has shown leadership, as he has on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, on delivering on the promise to get Brexit done, and on delivering on the urgent promises required by the exigencies of the pandemic.

For all the reasons I have iterated, the motion is one on which the Government can abstain. While we greatly value the work of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and of others who advise on the critical matter of how best to support the highest standards in public life, we do not support the suggestion that the recommendations of one particular report be adopted, without due consideration, as a single block. The report that we are debating was published a little over six months ago. It is extensive and wide-ranging, with 34 substantial recommendations, all of which demand careful consideration. That work is taking place, and in due course the Government will update the House, after careful thought, on our conclusions, which may be in parts. An essential part of that work will be considering the recommendations on their merits, and testing their application and their intentions. It is for those reasons that it is not possible for the Government to sign up to the motion today.

High standards are of paramount importance to this Government. We will update the House in due course, after further consideration of the many aspects of the committee's report.

1.35 pm

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I pass my sincere thanks to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) for bringing to the House this very important motion on the need to implement, quickly and in full, the recommendations made by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which found four areas of particular concern that required significant reform.

Given the time constraints, I will limit my remarks to what I consider to be the most pressing issue: the ministerial code, which, under this Government, has hardly been worth the paper it was written on, and the role of the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests. I can assure the House that if it divides this afternoon, the SNP will support the motion; if anything, the issue has been given even greater urgency as a result of the hurried, self-preserving changes that the Prime Minister made to the ministerial code in the immediate aftermath of the publication of the Sue Gray report.

Of course, the Government have tried to spin the changes that they introduced as being in line with what was recommended in the report, but we all know that the changes made to the ministerial code last week were made to protect the Prime Minister's personal position, and to change the rules governing behaviour ahead of the upcoming inquiry by the Privileges Committee. He appears to have viewed the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life as a smörgåsbord of suggested reforms, from which he could choose those that suited him and leave out those he did not much fancy.

Surely if this was a genuine attempt at a fresh start, if the Prime Minister wanted us to believe that he had truly been "humbled" by the Sue Gray report, and if he wanted the public to believe that he had changed, he would have accepted the committee's recommendations in full, particularly this recommendation:

“The Independent Adviser should be able to initiate investigations, determine findings of breaches, and a summary of their findings should be published in a timely manner.”

Rather, the Prime Minister has decreed that his independent ethics adviser will not be given any such powers, and will instead have to seek the Prime Minister’s permission before launching an investigation into possible ministerial misconduct.

In picking and choosing those bits of the report that suit him, the Prime Minister has, understandably and rightly, been accused of rigging the system and moving the goalposts, simply to get himself off the inconvenient hook on which he has been caught. Those on the Government Benches need to understand that the optics of this are absolutely dreadful—but then again, when has that ever been a concern to this Prime Minister of an increasingly authoritarian Government, who have repeatedly shown themselves to be allergic to scrutiny, on issues ranging from Prorogation to the awarding of PPE contracts?

On 25 May, in response to the publication of Sue Gray’s withering and damning report on the Prime Minister’s conduct and the toxic culture he allowed to fester in Downing Street, he stood at the Dispatch Box and told this House:

“I apologised when the revelations emerged, and I continue to apologise. I repeat that I am humbled by what has happened”—*[Official Report, 25 May 2022; Vol. 715, c. 299.]*

His humility and contrition, if they were ever there at all, lasted all of 48 hours, because the ink was hardly dry on *Hansard’s* report of the Prime Minister’s grovelling mea culpa before he was brazenly changing the ministerial code, not to strengthen parliamentary standards, to increase transparency and accountability or to rebuild the shattered public trust in this Parliament—not a bit of it—but in a way that would afford him greater protection from this Parliament and from scrutiny, and entrench even greater powers in his hands. With the Prime Minister having been publicly humiliated in the Sue Gray report and forced to pay a fixed penalty notice for breaking his own laws, and with an investigation by the Privileges Committee hanging over him, one would have thought, or hoped, that a period of self-reflection and humility would have been in order, but sadly not. Once again, his instinct for self-preservation came to the fore, and he watered down the ministerial code to save his own skin.

Had anyone else done that, we would have been shocked, aghast and disbelieving at such a lack of good faith—but were any of us really that shocked? Apart from the 211 unfortunate, gullible souls on the Conservative Benches, were any of us that surprised at what he did? Probably not, because we, and increasingly the public, know the character of this man, and they can see that there is no one and nothing that he will not bring down in his desperation to cling on to power. From the day he assumed office, we have seen the Prime Minister dismantle, degrade, debase and demean standards in public life.

This crisis has been long in the making, because the bigger problem is that there are no real rules. There is only the expectation that those in power will adhere to a code of behaviour based on personal integrity and common decency, and the whole system is all hung on a vague concept of individual honour. Of course, that all falls apart when a powerful individual decides that they will not behave with decency and honour, and matters

are made considerably worse when it turns out that the person at the very top lacks integrity, is devoid of a sense of shame, and completely lacks a moral compass. What then happens, as we are discovering, is that the system of ensuring standards of behaviour in public life falls apart, and there is very little anyone can do about it. The sad truth is that if someone at the very top of Government is so thick-skinned that they do not see being fined by the police or publicly eviscerated in a report about their personal behaviour as a resignation issue, and decides to tough it out until the news cycle inevitably moves on, then it appears that there is almost nothing we can do about it.

**Caroline Lucas:** The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that if the Prime Minister—any Prime Minister—can always simply bail out a ministerial colleague, even if they have been shown to have clearly broken the ministerial code, that undermines not only the code and the role of the independent adviser, but the role of all of us? We are all besmirched by the same sense that we cannot get our own house in order, and that is damaging to democracy and to the parliamentary and political system.

**Brendan O’Hara:** I absolutely agree. The system has to change, and that change has to start with us in this House. When the problem is staring us in the face, and when we know that what we see is wrong, then unless we act, we become complicit—we become part of the problem. I believe that history will judge us on whether we opposed or facilitated this dismantling of democracy.

Of course, in Scotland we know all about the dismantling of democracy. Despite the Tories not winning an election in Scotland since 1955, yet another Tory Government are imposing policies on us that we rejected. They are led by a Prime Minister whose unpopularity is plumbing such new depths that they will have to find new ways of measuring them. Interestingly, there are signs in Scotland that even his side is turning on him; most Scottish Tories are now struggling to defend his behaviour. As former MSP Adam Tomkins wrote recently,

“When a government asserts that the laws do not apply to it—that assertion offends not only the law itself, but our very idea of constitutional government.”

Even the former leader of the Scottish Conservatives, the noble Baroness Davidson of Lundin Links, told Channel 4 a few weeks ago that it was clear that the Prime Minister had lied to Parliament, and his position was therefore untenable. With characteristic steely determination, even the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), decided that the Prime Minister had to go—or maybe he did not have to go; or perhaps he should go, but maybe not right now; or maybe at some unspecified point in the future, he might have to think about resigning. Safe to say, it was not a ringing endorsement from the hon. Member for Moray; but then again, maybe it was—who knows? After all, we are talking about a man with more flip-flops than a seaside shoe shop.

But regardless of the hon. Member for Moray’s many different deeply considered and principled positions on the future of the Prime Minister, this whole sorry episode has made it clearer than ever that Scotland’s future lies far away from this place and its never-ending merry-go-round of scandal where standards in public life are shredded and burned by a rogue Prime Minister.

[Brendan O'Hara]

Scotland deserves a better democracy than the charade that is currently being foisted on us by Westminster, and the offer to change it once and for all will, I believe, prove irresistible when we have our independence referendum.

1.45 pm

**John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Let me begin by welcoming this motion, and particularly welcoming the response by my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister when he said that he basically supports the principle behind the motion, even though I think that we on the Government Benches intend to abstain on it. The principle behind the motion is important because standards in public life matter and the Nolan principles matter. If any of us, in any part of this House, start to think that they are technical, passing fancies or things that come and go, then we are fundamentally misunderstanding our role here, misunderstanding the importance of the integrity that the Nolan principles enshrine, and putting in danger the way that our democracy is being perceived among constituents—the people who voted to send us here in the first place.

The crucial thing is that many of us will often face the situation where people say, “Oh, those MPs up in Westminster, they're all the same—apart from my local MP.” That is great if you are the local MP they are referring to, because you know that they know you and hold you in high regard, but just think about what it says for democracy in general if they say that, as a class, MPs are held in such low regard and democracy is so mistrusted and distrusted. It cannot be good for this place as an institution and it cannot be good for our democracy. Therefore, it is essential that none of us underplays or forgets the central and enduring importance of the Nolan principles and of standards in public life. I was therefore delighted to hear that there is, broadly speaking, cross-party agreement on the principles of this. That is absolutely great. It bears repetition—constant repetition—and I am glad to see it.

I support much of the motion, particularly regarding an awful lot of the 34 recommendations in the report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life—but not quite all. There are many things that are extremely admirable and that I have called for myself. I would disagree with what the committee has said on a couple of things, despite the fact that overall its report is excellent. I want to add one or two things that it has become clear over the past few days need to be done to further strengthen the role of the independent adviser on the ministerial code. Many parts of the report have already been introduced. I will not repeat what my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister outlined and go through those things again, but they are welcome and they are necessary. I supported them as they were introduced and I still support them today.

However, a great number of the recommendations in the CSPL report have not yet been introduced, and I devoutly hope that they will be. Incidentally, a parallel report, the Boardman report—No. 3; he has done several—was issued in the middle of last year, and a Government response remains outstanding. I hope that I can press the Minister to explain to us in his closing remarks—or any Member on the Front Bench to explain to us—when and whether the response to the Boardman report will

be put out. Logically, the Government should respond to that report at the same time as they respond to the CSPL report. The two go together; they have mutually complementary recommendations, and they should be responded to at the same time.

For example, both the Boardman report and that from the Committee on Standards in Public Life recommend proposals for the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments—that is, on what we as Members of Parliament can all do after we have left this place, such as the jobs we can take outside, and on whether we should be bound by that committee's recommendations. There is a really simple, clear and sensible recommendation in the Boardman report, which I think is duplicated in the report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life, to require Ministers to sign a legal deed to say, “I will abide by the decisions of ACOBA.” Those decisions would therefore become legally binding on the Minister concerned, even if they ceased to be a Minister.

There are a series of very sensible proposals in the report by the CSPL and in the Boardman report that need to be implemented. They need to be introduced, and quickly, because as we have heard today the noise of public drumming of fingers and tapping of feet while we wait to say that this is not good enough and that we need to raise our standards and our game as a democracy is getting ever louder. We cannot afford to wait.

Those proposals need to be introduced, and ditto the proposals on lobbying, incidentally. The CSPL makes a series of recommendations on lobbying—recommendations 26 to 30 for anybody who is interested—that complement the recommendations that have been either discussed or recommended by the Select Committee on Standards. I forget their precise status, and I suspect the Chair of that Committee is about to put me right.

**Chris Bryant:** We have already made our recommendation and produced our report, and I hope that the Government will allow time before the summer recess for us to adopt a new code of conduct for the House.

**John Penrose:** I thank the Chair for that clarification, and he is absolutely right. If we put those recommendations alongside the Committee on Standards in Public Life's proposals on lobbying, they make a suite of proposals that will make our democracy much more robust, much cleaner, much more transparent and, in general, much better. We should do those things immediately, and I encourage the Minister to put his foot down on the accelerator as hard as he possibly can to get them out, agreed and announced as quickly as possible.

There is much to agree with in the report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life. I would, however, venture to agree with the Minister when he says that there is one major concern—one, but it is important—about the notion of putting some of the recommendations on a statutory footing rather than adhering to the traditional constitutional principle that it has to be the Prime Minister who appoints and can dismiss his or her Cabinet. That is absolutely fundamental for any Prime Minister. It does not matter if they are a Labour Prime Minister, a coalition Prime Minister or a Conservative Prime Minister, it is absolutely fundamental. On that one important point I would respectfully depart from the recommendation of the Committee on Standards in Public Life.



I will not trouble the House very much longer, but I said at the start of my speech that I wanted to add a couple of points about the role of the independent adviser on the ministerial code that I believe have been revealed in the past couple of days. We heard earlier in an intervention from the Chair of the Standards Committee that the independent adviser feels that it is impossible for him to make a recommendation because if his advice were not followed, he would feel that he had to resign. In this particular case, when the question is whether the Prime Minister's conduct has followed the ministerial code, which has never happened before, that has led to the adviser not issuing any recommendations or findings of fact, as he would with any other Minister. That is not good enough. It cannot be allowed to continue and is not strong enough as a way in which the independent adviser should work.

I will propose to further changes, which I hope the Minister will listen to and follow. The first is that we should be very clear that it should not be a resigning matter for the independent adviser if his or her advice is not followed by the Prime Minister of the day. They should issue independent advice. In the same way, Sir Chris Whitty issued advice to the Prime Minister during the pandemic on the medical and scientific options available to him. Sometimes the Prime Minister took that advice, sometimes he did not, but Sir Chris Whitty did not have to resign every time he did not. It would have been plainly bonkers if he had done so and I believe that the same principle should apply to the independent adviser. They should offer advice and it is then up to the Prime Minister to accept it or not and to justify his or her decision to Parliament as a result.

The corollary of that is that, although it is too late now, in this case the independent adviser should have been able and expected, had we introduced such a change, to issue a report on whether the Prime Minister had followed the ministerial code. The independent adviser had the Sue Gray report in front of him and could therefore have said, "This means that the Prime Minister followed the ministerial code here, and did not follow it there. This one is a serious breach, that is a minor breach and that is not a breach at all." At that point, we as a House would have had something to get our teeth into, and that would have clarified the situation and stripped out an awful lot of inevitable party political posturing as we would all have had a common shared base of facts. Without that, the subsequent debate has been a great deal less targeted, a great deal less clear and a great deal less effective.

**Chris Bryant:** I completely agree with everything the hon. Gentleman has just said about the supposedly independent adviser on the ministerial code. I wonder whether his interpretation of what Lord Geidt wrote is the same as mine. My reading of it was that he basically felt that the Prime Minister had breached the ministerial code but he did not feel he could say so.

**John Penrose:** I did not reach that conclusion, which is why I waited until I saw the Prime Minister's reply justifying his view of his approach to the ministerial code, which he published last week and on which I intervened on the Minister earlier. That was what then led me, very sadly and with great regret, to resign my post yesterday. None the less, I am pleased to note that the hon. Gentleman agrees with my broader point

about the way in which the independent adviser's powers should be further amended. I am afraid that that has only just become apparent in the course of the past week or so, but it is a further important omission. Without those changes, the entire process remains toothless if in future we have a question over whether the Prime Minister him or herself has adhered to the ministerial code.

**Margaret Beckett:** I have been thinking about what the hon. Gentleman said earlier, when he said that he differed from the views of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. Perhaps I did not follow exactly the terms of his observations, so I would be grateful if he would correct me, but I got the impression that he was saying that he could not go all the way with the committee because he thought that we were giving the power to the independent adviser to decide whether a Minister came and went. That is not the case. In the committee's recommendations, the independent adviser is to advise on whether there has been a breach, but it is for the Prime Minister to make the decision.

**John Penrose:** I can reassure the right hon. Lady that I meant what she just said. My point about departing from the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life is about whether to make some of these bodies statutory and to allow court oversight, which is a constitutional point rather than the one she is making. I was entirely content with the point made by the committee that she has just clarified.

My final point about the role of the independent adviser on the ministerial code is that if we make the two changes that I have just described, we will make sure that the process has teeth, but one further change will still be required. If the Prime Minister is found by the independent adviser to have made a material breach of the ministerial code, it will then be necessary for this Parliament to sit in judgment on that report, because no one else can do it. The Prime Minister certainly cannot because he or she would be judge and jury in their own case, which is fundamentally never going to work. We will have to do that in a democratic way—we are ultimately the high court of Parliament; that is what we are here to do. At the moment, I do not think that our Standing Orders allow us to address that point—not about the Government, which I remain strongly in favour of and I support, but about the Prime Minister as an individual. The provision to censure or introduce other motions is, I believe, insufficiently clear and easy in that one specific and important case. Without it, the process will not have the necessary teeth and claws. We hope that they will never have to be used, but they have to be there just in case they are needed. With that, I will leave the debate to go on.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. If everybody can resume their seats, I want to give some advice. First, please remember that everybody taking part in the debate should come back for the wind-ups. We hope that they will start at about 3.40 pm, but it could be sooner than that. If a Division takes place, it will be at about 4 pm. We cannot be absolutely certain, but that is the guidance. I am trying to do this without a time limit, so looking at the number of people who want to speak, if everybody speaks for around eight

[Mr Deputy Speaker]

minutes—perhaps a bit more; let us see how it goes—we will fit in with the schedule that I have in front of me. Clearly, if people speak for longer, those towards the end will have less time.

2 pm

**Margaret Beckett** (Derby South) (Lab): I welcome the initiative of my right hon. and hon. Friends in calling this debate, and I welcome the terms of the motion, which calls on the House to implement the report and to follow up that implementation, which is often as important as the initial decision. I declare an interest as I have been a member of the Committee on Standards in Public Life since November 2013. I should say at once, as I said earlier, that I am not speaking on behalf of the committee—I never do, as innumerable journalists can testify. Our independent chair, and only he, speaks for the committee as a whole.

I am grateful to the Minister, and I think other committee members will be too, for the terms in which he spoke of the committee members. For my part, I have great sympathy with our heroic independent members—there are three political members and only four independent members; at the moment, as he will know, we have a vacancy—who face a very heavy workload. They carry out the taxing and time-consuming work of analysing and studying things to give strength to the committee's reports. One of our independent members said the other day that the committee and its members are committed on a cross-party basis to protecting and promoting standards, and that our focus is always on the impartial interpretation of evidence and the long-term measures necessary to protect standards.

I also say briefly to the Minister that, if he looks on his desk, or somebody else's desk, he may find some observations from the committee suggesting that the decision made, as I recall, under David Cameron's premiership to reduce the committee's size—its numbers and the resources available to it—should be reconsidered. Those independent members carry a heavy burden and he spoke sympathetically about their work.

Our chair, very properly, regretted the Prime Minister's decision to adopt one—only one—of the committee's recommendations. Speaking for myself, as I said, I thought that was outrageous, particularly because the Prime Minister, and the Minister, used the committee's report to justify the decision to weaken the penalties for breaching the ministerial code.

I am not speaking on the committee's behalf, but the statement that it issued following the Prime Minister's decision about the ministerial code said:

“There still needs to be greater independence in the regulation of the Ministerial Code, notwithstanding”—

I say this because the Minister emphasised, and I wholly understand why he did and I have some sympathy with his circumstances, how much the Government were following the terms of the committee's recommendations—“the changes announced” to the terms of reference of the role of the independent adviser. It went on:

“The new process for initiating investigations does not create the degree of independence we called for. Whereas previously the Adviser could only conduct an investigation into an alleged breach of the Code at the Prime Minister's request, the Adviser can now initiate their own investigations ‘having consulted the

Prime Minister and obtained his consent’. So no longer a direct commission by the Prime Minister, but still dependent on the Prime Minister's permission. This is a step forward, it is an improvement”—

the Minister quoted the chair of the committee saying that—

“in process but it does not fundamentally change the powers of the Independent Adviser.”

I think the Minister, wholly understandably, sought to create the impression that perhaps it did.

I want to set the discussion about the ministerial code in a wider context and look at events elsewhere. I often read these days about events in the United States where many people are concerned about whether the former President is likely to be re-elected. There is much talk about the work of the Republican party in discouraging voter involvement and participation. I am afraid that, when I look at the legislative record of this Government, I see similar steps being taken here, although without much fanfare.

In my childhood, children played a game called grandma's footsteps. The main player is in position and those behind try to draw close and touch them while the main player looks over their shoulder and hopes to catch somebody moving. The whole idea is that, if they do not catch them moving, they can continue. Of course, the effect of the game is that gradually, stealthily, inexorably the players draw closer to their main target. Stealthily, there is movement, and that seems to be exactly what is happening in our public life and to our democracy.

This morning, Lord Hague was reported as saying that nothing

“matters more than the health of our democracy.”

I strongly agree. Unnecessary bureaucratic regulation of exactly how people are allowed to vote is a good example of something that everyone knows will effectively discourage those who the Conservatives perhaps assume are less likely to vote for them.

That is part of an attack on one after another of the institutions of public life, whose principal characteristic is, or has been, their independence. The Electoral Commission will now be guided by a Government Minister, which should be quite unnecessary for any independent body. I have referred to the practice that occurs, as I understand it, in the United States, but I am conscious of more recent examples in Hungary and, indeed, in Russia. People in this country often express surprise at the degree to which it appears that the public in those countries accept, virtually uncritically, the version of events retailed to them by their Governments. To that surprise, the response here is often that independent voices in their media were first undermined and then, in effect, silenced.

Again, what has the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport announced? There are cuts, pressure and threats to the independence of the BBC, and the privatisation of Channel 4. The independence of the independent, sometimes critical media—I assure the Minister that they are critical not solely of Conservative Administrations—is being undermined under this Government.

What about public appointments, which were mentioned earlier? Concern was expressed in the committee when, under David Cameron's premiership, a greater role and greater power for political input to appointments was allowed, but it was still assumed—perhaps the correct

word would be “hoped”—that no Minister would abuse such a role. The whole atmosphere of such appointments has now changed dramatically. The more important and influential the appointment to be made, the more likely it is to be preceded by heavy briefing from No. 10 as to who exactly the Prime Minister would prefer to see appointed. So even those considering applying for such an appointment would be discouraged before the process even starts. Now we know that blatant political interference may follow. At least twice in fairly recent times an independent process of appointment has been halted and replaced by a Prime Minister who seems to be indifferent to somebody’s capacity to actually carry out the job for which they are seeking appointment as long as he thinks they are on his side. It is right in this debate to stress that that is exactly the purpose the appointments process is intended to frustrate. It is intended to ensure both that people are up to doing the job they are applying for, and that they are independently appointed and will not display a political bias.

I can see why there has been so little response to our report, with its 34 recommendations, because of course, from the Government’s point of view, it has one critical, fundamental flaw. At its heart is the belief that in independent scrutiny lies a process that conveys high standards, and that is precisely what this Government appear not to believe. It has always seemed to me that one of our strengths as a country has been that we have an unwritten constitution, because that gives us a degree of flexibility that others may lack. One of the things I deplore about the present handling of standards matters is that it strengthens the case for a written constitution, although I have to admit not sufficiently to make me accept it.

**Chris Bryant:** Oh, go on.

**Margaret Beckett:** I hear my hon. Friend’s representations on that point, but I simply say to him that what perhaps the American experience may have demonstrated is that a rogue Prime Minister, like a rogue President, can ignore a written constitution as easily as they can an unwritten constitution, so I remain unconvinced. But what I also remain is absolutely clear that we need greater emphasis on the need for high standards in public life and that that emphasis can be sustained only through a process that is rooted in independence and ensures greater scrutiny of all those who exercise responsibility on behalf of our electorate.

2.12 pm

**Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con):** I am honoured to be called so early in this debate—among my many colleagues keen to get in. [*Laughter.*] No, it is a great honour.

I want to start by echoing the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) on the importance of the motion and of the report by the committee. It is also an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett), and I pay tribute to her work, her personal integrity and her commitment to the principles of standards in public life.

Of course, I disagree with the right hon. Lady on her judgment of the changes that the Government are making to the code. They are very important changes, but I do not think they are as exciting as she suggests. Of course, the Government are not going as far as

Labour would like, but the fact is, as the Minister made clear, the code is now stronger than it was before—it is stronger than ever—and the Government are following the requests of the committee.

On the crucial point about whether the ministerial adviser is able to initiate investigations, the ministerial adviser is able to initiate investigations independently of the Government in a way that he was not able to do before. It is right and appropriate that the Prime Minister gives the green light for an investigation to proceed—there may be issues, particularly around national security, where the Prime Minister has to step in—but it would be absolutely outrageous, and it would bring down the wrath of this House and of the country, if the Prime Minister abused that power. It is right that he or she has it, and independent scrutiny, which the right hon. Lady mentioned, remains at the core of the code.

I am afraid that the criticisms that are made miss the mark. The fact is that, for all the Prime Minister’s difficulties in recent weeks, the changes that are being proposed in the code would not have helped him in this episode at all. He is just as accountable as he ever was—in fact, more so.

I want to repeat the point I made to the deputy leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), in my intervention. The Institute for Government has made a very important intervention. It has said that the charges that are being made against these changes to the code by Opposition Members are “confected.” The Institute for Government has called on Opposition Members to correct the record when they say that the ministerial code is being weakened by these changes. I invite them to do so in the interests of honesty and of the standards in public life that they claim to uphold.

The Institute for Government has praised the changes that are being made, particularly the introduction of a range of sanctions. Indeed, the Committee on Standards in Public Life has said that the changes represent a “step forward” and an “improvement in the process”. The right hon. Member for Derby South talked about grandmother’s footsteps, but the committee she sits on has talked about a step forward, and that is perhaps what she meant. We are taking steps towards a better system. It is not a perfect system—we will never have a system so perfect that nobody needs to be good—but this is getting better.

I want to finish by talking about Labour’s suggestion or its idea of a perfect system, which is a call for a single ethics commissioner. I think this is a very dangerous proposal. There is much talk of democracy, including from the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) on the SNP Front Bench, but the proposal here is to set up an unelected individual charged with this god-like power to judge the morals of Ministers. The right hon. Member for Derby South talked about Russia, and this is an echo of the political commissars who sit alongside politicians judging them on their conformity to moral standards or to ideology. This is not the British way.

Ultimately, this House is self-regulating. We are accountable to the law, we are accountable to our consciences and, ultimately, we are accountable to the people. I appreciate that Labour Members do not like the fact that they are in a minority in this House. They do not like not getting their way, particularly on a question of public morals, and I sympathise with them.

[Danny Kruger]

They do not like the Prime Minister, and I sympathise—*[Interruption]*—while I disagree. The fact is that the Government this Prime Minister leads retain the support of the majority of Members of this House. [HON. MEMBERS: “No, he doesn’t!”] The Government have the confidence of this House—that is the ultimate accountability that any Minister needs—and I am sorry that Labour Members do not like the democracy they are part of.

2.17 pm

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger). He did a fine job of trying to defend the indefensible, but the thing that undermines his argument is the timing of the changes to the code: the coincidence that, just as the Prime Minister is to be investigated by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, he has decided he wants to move the goalposts. That is obvious, and it is not lost on members of the public that he has changed the rules. The reason why he has done so is that he fears what is going to come in the future—the not too distant future.

We are here having this debate today really because we have seen this conduct on an industrial scale at No. 10. The PM has been fined, the Chancellor has been fined and so have numerous members of staff. What those charged with upholding standards in the future have to look at is what has been said to this House and what rules were in place at the time the events took place that have led to the Prime Minister rushing to make these changes.

It is worth reminding ourselves that, when the wine and cheese party took place in the garden of No. 10, people were allowed only to meet one other person from outside their household, as long as it was in a public place and 2 metre social distancing was maintained. Friends and family were not allowed to go to one another’s homes or gardens. Later in that year, after the rules had changed, the rules prohibited indoor gatherings of two or more people. An exception was allowed for work if it was reasonably necessary for work purposes, and in those circumstances the necessary participants could physically attend such meetings and social distancing had to be applied. Those charged with upholding the rules and code must satisfy themselves that what was said in this House, and the rules that applied, are consistent. We have seen photographs of the garden party, and a photograph of the Prime Minister inside No.10 at a party on 13 November. Allegra Stratton talked about a party that took place in No.10 on 18 December. She was head of media for the Prime Minister, and if she were rehearsing a response to the press about an alleged party that took place in No.10 on 18 December, it is inconceivable that she would not go to the Prime Minister and warn him that he might be quizzed about that party.

Again, going back to the code that we are debating, we must be satisfied and demand answers to ensure that the code has been adhered to. This is what was said on 1 December at the Dispatch Box by the Prime Minister, in response to a question from the Leader of the Opposition about the party in No.10:

“What I can tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman is that all guidance was followed completely in No. 10.”—*[Official Report, 1 December 2021; Vol. 704, c. 909.]*

The following week—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. I want to give a little caution about any comments made about anything that is before the privileges committee. Please be very careful. We are talking about conduct in public life generally and about the ministerial code of conduct, but without going into detail on things that are being adjudicated and that will come before the House in time.

**Clive Efford:** I am grateful for that guidance, but I thought I would be in order because I am quoting the public record—I am reading from *Hansard*—on what was said in relation to these events. I am doing that because we have a debate about the code of conduct, and we must be satisfied that when the response comes back, these questions are answered.

At the start of Prime Minister’s questions on 8 December, the Prime Minister stated:

“May I begin by saying that I understand and share the anger up and down the country at seeing No. 10 staff seeming to make light of lockdown measures? I can understand how infuriating it must be to think that the people who have been setting the rules have not been following the rules, because I was also furious to see that clip.”—*[Official Report, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 372.]*

I think it inconceivable that people were not advised that questions may be raised about the party that took place in No.10 Downing Street, and I would like that to be measured against the code we are talking about today. The Prime Minister has given repeated assurances that clearly need to be investigated further. His repeated assertions to this House were that no rules were broken and there were no parties, and we must have an answer to that question.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. I am sorry. Irrespective of whether it is in *Hansard*, this matter is before the Committee of Privileges, which is considering it specifically. The specifics of whether the Prime Minister misled, or inadvertently misled, the House is not for today’s debate.

**Clive Efford:** With due respect, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am not making the conclusion that he has done so; I am just raising questions that I expect to be answered.

My next point is about how the code has been applied in the past, because Ministers have resigned when they have inadvertently misled the House. The most recent example I think of is that of the former Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, who inadvertently misled the House about immigration figures, and as a consequence of the information that was supplied to her, resigned from her post. It is not true that the ministerial code requires only a slap on the wrist for senior members of the Government—far from it. There are numerous examples of Ministers who have gone because they have inadvertently—not deliberately or maliciously—misled this House. Should the conclusion to the investigation be that people have misled the House, inadvertently or otherwise, resignations should follow. The public expect nothing less. Last night’s vote was an opportunity to draw a line under the sorry situation in which we find ourselves, because it is undermining our democracy and undermining this House, and it is time that it was drawn to a conclusion. Last night Conservative MPs missed that opportunity, but I do not think the public will when their time comes.

2.25 pm

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a crying shame that we do not have more speakers on the Government Back Benches today, because the contributions we heard from the hon. Members for Devizes (Danny Kruger) and for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) have been good and thoughtful. I found more to recommend in the contribution from the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare, but when listening to them both I was left thinking that surely, with a bit of good faith on both sides, this is a debate that we as Parliament could have that would put our politics into a better position. I regret very much that I do not see that political good faith coming from the Treasury Bench, and in the absence of that we must look for it among Government Back Benchers—[*Interruption.*] Obviously I have been too generous in my praise, as the hon. Member for Devizes is about to leave the Chamber, so I will not pursue the point any further than that.

There is one point in the Government's position with which I have some sympathy, because there are other important issues that the House ought to be discussing. The cost of living crisis is unparalleled in my adult life—I cannot remember anything like this since my childhood years in the 1970s—and the strategic challenges of a ground war in mainland Europe are something I thought I would never see in my life. Those substantial issues demand and require the attention of Parliament.

However, I part company with the Government on two points. First, the position in which the Government have put themselves cannot be just wished away, and they will not move on to those important issues unless and until they address the position in which the Prime Minister has put them. Secondly, if those big and pressing issues are to be dealt with, that requires the Government to be led by a Prime Minister who has the political and moral authority to deal with them. It is apparent from the outcome of the vote of confidence last night among Conservative Members, that the Prime Minister has lost that moral and political authority, and it is difficult to see how he can regain it, certainly while he continues to behave in the way he does. The Government's position on the report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and the ministerial code as a consequence, tells me that this Government are bothered not about improving things, but rather about protecting their own position, and especially that of the Prime Minister.

We have heard some remarkable mea culpas from the Prime Minister in recent weeks and months, but the actions that followed those mea culpas have been somewhat pedestrian, shall we say? They certainly do not match the rhetoric of the mea culpa. To suggest that, somehow or other, the problems within 10 Downing Street and the Government as a whole can be addressed simply by shifting the desks around and taking a few people here, a Spad there and a principal private secretary elsewhere out of a job underestimates and genuinely lacks an understanding of the scale of the crisis that faces our democracy.

Having said that, the mea culpas that we have heard from the Prime Minister have also been fundamentally undermined if it is true, as it has been reported, that last night, in the 1922 committee, he said, "I'd do it again." If that is correct, it is difficult to see how the apologies given to the House and to the public are in any way sincere. Essentially, the position is that we require a

practice, a code of conduct, that reflects the expected standards of behaviour. We should start with those standards of behaviour, and measure behaviour by them. Instead, we are getting a code that looks at the standard of behaviour prevalent in Downing Street and seeks to match that. It is, if I may say so, the very opposite of levelling up.

The report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life should be taken as a whole. It is not something to cherry-pick, unless of course there is some overwhelming, pressing reason as to why that should not be the case. On that point, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare did produce some genuinely good and valid points. Again, it takes me back to the position that the House found itself in with Owen Paterson and lobbying last year, when the Government sought to proceed in a way for which they had not first built the political consensus. It would be quite easily possible to build a political consensus, but that requires the Government to take a lead—one that we have not seen from them.

It is also well past the time when the ministerial code of conduct should have been underpinned by statute. I say that with some measure of regret because, as I said in my intervention on the Minister, here is an instance where the Government are seeking to rely on the adoption of parliamentary privilege, but the House has already reduced the scope of that parliamentary privilege. We have handed the investigation of complaints of inappropriate behaviour to the Independent Complaints and Grievances Scheme and handed the regulation of our expenses and other allied issues to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

These issues were all debated in 2009 when IPSA was set up, and the question of privilege was taken very seriously at that point. That was one of the few votes—I think there were four—that the Labour party lost in 13 years in government, but it was necessary at the time because the public outrage at the expenses scandal, when people learned about what MPs had claimed for and been paid for, was such that significant change was necessary. It was necessary to modify the doctrine of parliamentary privilege to maintain the standing of Parliament itself, and we are back in that position here and now.

This is what we need to do. We need to get the parties together to build a consensus and have the discussion to ensure that we can have a ministerial code of conduct that can command the confidence of the public and of all parties in the House and not be seen to be the creature of any individual party. The position of the independent adviser on the ministerial code is now long past remedy. Given everything that we have seen in recent weeks and months, it is no longer tenable to say that, yes, he or she can initiate investigations, but only with the consent of the Prime Minister of the day. It is that requirement for consent that fundamentally undermines the office.

Trust has been breached. It is for the House to demonstrate that we understand the scale of the damage done and to repair it. The Government should have done that, but they clearly have no intention of doing so, so we in this House must.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. Will Members look towards seven minutes for speeches, please?

2.35 pm

**Ms Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the deputy Leader of the Opposition for getting the debate and for her powerful and informative contribution in leading the debate. Standards in public life matter—they mattered in the past, they will matter in the future, and they matter now. The Nolan principles were established in 1995 to set the expected standards, with seven principles to help a public office holder provide good governance to the people they serve. The Government and their leader have forsaken those principles.

I respect the 148 Members on the Conservative Benches who put the country first yesterday, yet I do wonder why the Cabinet continues to support a Prime Minister who has fallen foul of the ministerial code. Which of the seven principles are they displaying in continuing to support the first law-breaking Prime Minister in office? Selflessness? Integrity? Objectivity? Openness? Honesty? Leadership? I am not sure whether it is any of them. I ask them to consider what they have done.

All Members are elected to serve the people, not a law-breaking Prime Minister. Our system of government gives a sitting Prime Minister immense power. The Prime Minister is the person responsible for setting out and enforcing the ministerial code. It was not anticipated that a Prime Minister would be the one under scrutiny. It was not anticipated that a Prime Minister would attempt to water down the code to cover his own potential breaking of it. That is why the motion matters.

The standards expected of those in public office need to be strengthened, not weakened. If there is one lesson to learn from the partygate saga, that should be it. The duty of putting the country first falls on all Members of this House. We are the ultimate arbiters of strengthening standards in public life. No Prime Minister is worth forsaking one's own principles, and they should not be sacrificed for this Prime Minister.

The argument that now is not the right time to strengthen the standards expected and to remove the Prime Minister due to the war in Ukraine, the cost of living crisis and the Northern Ireland protocol does not wash. They are the very reason why that must be done. With issues of such grave importance, public trust and confidence matter more than ever.

I want our country to continue to support Ukraine until it is victorious, I want the Government to do more to help people through the cost of living crisis and I want a sensible solution to the Northern Ireland protocol. A majority of the House wants all of that. The only risk to those causes is having a Prime Minister and Government who do not enjoy the public's support. That is why the standards expected of those in public office must be strengthened. It is time to clean up politics.

2.39 pm

**Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): I would like to begin by echoing the comments made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and saying how disappointing I find it that there are not more contributors from the Government Benches. Indeed, the Government Benches resemble more the decks on the Marie Celeste than a Parliament on a day when we are debating something of such import, notwithstanding the excellent contributions, in their own way, made by the hon. Members for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) and for Devizes (Danny Kruger).

I also enjoyed very much the contribution made by the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett). Her scepticism towards a written constitution disappointed me but did not surprise me. There are many big ticket constitutional items that this place could benefit from, such as seeing us elected here under a proportional voting system, and having a written constitution, a bill of rights and an independent constitutional court beyond the scope of ministerial interference. Those are just the standard trappings of modern liberal democracies, but I have long since given up any hope of them coming into effect in this place, which is one of the reasons why I think it would be better for Scotland, where I believe a consensus for such measures exists, to make a fresh start.

Even with those big ticket reforms, we still need codes, standards, norms and conventions for how individuals and groups operate within that framework. In her opening remarks, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) referenced Professor Peter Hennessy and his "good chap" theory of government. In putting that forward, he emphasised the courtesies, conventions and orthodoxies that are taken for granted and which mean that the situation Lord Hailsham described many years ago—of government being like an elected dictatorship—never actually comes to pass, and that the individual excesses of Ministers, Prime Ministers or over-mighty and overreaching Executives can be curbed and corrected, rather than having anyone or anything slithering in between the gaps that exist and exhausting all reserves of trust and good will when they are no longer deserving of either.

In those spaces, standards matter; any perception to the contrary that is allowed to build up damages politics in general and damages us all. It diminishes the legitimacy of the decisions we take and deters good people from getting involved in public life. Most damaging of all, it pushes people away from having the chance to express their views democratically by participating at the ballot box.

We have heard in several contributions so far the continuing reverberations of partygate. Certainly, in a debate on standards, that provides a target-rich environment. But even prior to that, there were no shortages of areas of concern. To pick an example, notoriously, when the Prime Minister's ethics adviser found that the Home Secretary had breached the ministerial code governing Minister's behaviour, the only consequence that flowed from that was that the Prime Minister's adviser ended up having to resign while the Home Secretary remained in office. Although a court found that the Prime Minister had not misapplied the ministerial code—whatever people might think about it, legally it was a sound decision—it was a sound decision simply because of the nature of how the code works at the moment: the Prime Minister retains complete control over all references, including any references in the code relating to himself.

A standards system can operate only with as much integrity as those charged with implementing it have themselves. We have a Prime Minister who is not only the gatekeeper to that process, but also effectively the judge, the jury and, if need be, the executioner, and he remains so despite his manifest unsuitability, in my view, to carry out that role and despite the very clear recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life referenced in the motion before us today.

I accept that there has been a fresh iteration, as the Paymaster General, the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) says, of the ministerial code and how it applies. At a time when the public focus on standards has never been higher, it is very disappointing that the Prime Minister and the Government have once again decided to pick and choose what suits them and what does not. It is telling that the seven Nolan principles were removed from the introduction to the Government's guidance, effectively disassociating the Prime Minister personally in word from that which he had already quite spectacularly disassociated himself in deed during his time in office.

If the problems are clear, so too are the solutions—or at least some of them. It was illustrated graphically in stark terms yesterday that the Prime Minister has lost a considerable amount of authority within his party, an authority he had already lost in the electorate at large a long time ago. I am bound to observe that in Scotland the Prime Minister can now rely on the support of only two of its 59 Members of Parliament—although we are a day on from yesterday and who knows what positions the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) has contorted himself into since then? Sadly, the Prime Minister is not about to be run out of office in the next two hours, but whether it is in the next two days, two weeks, two months, two years, most assuredly the Prime Minister will be gone, meriting his own rather inglorious set of footnotes in history.

This issue, therefore, is about the standards framework we have going forward. We should not twist it or distort it to suit the present incumbent, but we should be mindful of examples of his own behaviour in order to make the code and its operation as watertight as it ever can be. I challenged the Paymaster General, when he was good enough to take my intervention, on whether the Government would implement all the recommendations, as he indicated when he said he was supportive of the principles. I have to say that I remain baffled about how the Government can support the principles of the motion while recommending that Members abstain and still saying that they will not support the implementation of all the measures in full.

In closing my remarks, I do not think there is anything that can be done to restore the reputation of this Prime Minister or the Administration he leads, but what is needed urgently is to rebuild trust by reaffirming immediately and without qualification the seven principles of public life—selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership—and by implementing, without repetition, deviation or hesitation, each and every one of the recommendations in the report, as the motion before us calls for.

2.47 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Over the last few days, I am afraid to say that I have heard far too many people seeking to excuse the inexcusable and defend the indefensible from the Prime Minister on the basis that he got the big calls right, or that he is an election winner. Well, I would certainly take issue with the former, and on the latter I simply say that past performance is no guarantee of future success. I do not want to talk about the merits or otherwise of this Government or this Prime Minister, because that misses the point of today's debate, and misses an important part of our function here. Those factors should never be

used to excuse rule-breaking anyway. We are not here just to deliver x or y policy for our constituents; we also have a wider responsibility on the way that politics is done. That is why tolerating the chipping away of our standards because the ends justify the means should never be an acceptable response from the Government. We are custodians of democracy. How we act, what we say and where we set the limits of adherence to the rules all matter, because they form the baseline for the next generation to work from. If we are not careful, bit by bit, the standards and behaviours that we take for granted will be lost.

Our liberal democracy is fragile, and it cannot be taken for granted. It has to be cherished, nurtured and supported by us as its guardians every single day. Every watering down of the rules, every reduction in transparency, every snub to accountability has to be challenged, because many Governments want to maximise control and minimise risk. Many Governments also have a respect for the rules and understand their place in history, but when we have a Government with a track record like this one, it really is up to us to push back. Be it by shutting down Parliament, green-lighting breaking the law in a specific and limited way, trying to wriggle out of treaties they have just signed, changing the way standards rules operate retrospectively or excusing breaches of the ministerial code, this Government have a wretched track record of ignoring the rules when it suits them. But rules matter, and how our politics is conducted should be bigger than any individual Government. This place should be a force for good, for change and for the benefit of all. When the rules are bent, ignored or changed to suit a short-term political agenda, we all pay a long-term price.

This is all about the tone set from the top. It is about leadership. When the Government are led, as they are, by a Prime Minister who behaves as though the rules never apply to him, and who has used every trick in the book to wriggle out of responsibility, we risk slipping into an authoritarian style of Government that we will not easily shake off. Our electoral system and unwritten constitution mean that it is quite possible to have a Government, as we do, who can push through whatever they want and a Prime Minister who believes that he can get away with whatever he wishes to.

Our parliamentary system has relied on people behaving with honour and respecting conventions. However, when people do not live up to those ideals, and are at best agnostic on, or at worst hostile to, standards, the weaknesses in our system become all too apparent. Democracy is then damaged, and it dies not with a bang, but with a whimper over a period of years, with a tweaking of the rules here and a ditching of a convention there. We have a Government who have become arrogant because of the size of their majority and contemptuous about the need for probity.

If people see continual abuse of the rules and ever-shifting sands of accountability, they end up saying that we are all as bad as one another, that no politicians can be trusted, and that evasiveness and avarice are baked into the body politic, and if they vote at all, they do so holding their nose. There is no shortage of people out there who are only too willing to believe that that is true of every one of us here. They are only too willing to call us out for being motivated solely by personal gain, and for lacking any kind of responsibility for what we do in

[Justin Madders]

office. We do not need to give them any fuel for the fire. We need to show them that it is possible to govern selflessly in the public interest, that standards in public life matter, and that, when it comes to protecting democracy, we can lead, not just follow.

We have heard how the new code will, in effect, make the Prime Minister judge and jury of whatever process or complaint is put before him. That really grates for a lot of my constituents, who would question whether they have ever had that degree of discretion or latitude in their dealings with Departments, and whether they have had the opportunity to appeal decisions made against on benefit overpayment, child maintenance and the loan charge. People feel that the rules have not been applied fairly to them, and they then see the Government changing the rules as they see fit.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about rules. St Thomas More—a former occupant of your Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker—said that this land is planted with rules, and that those rules, like trees, are there to protect us when the wind turns. This issue is about not just this Administration or this Parliament, but Administrations and Parliaments to come. That is why this debate is so important.

**Justin Madders:** I totally agree, which is why what we are arguing for today is so important. These rules will change over time, but it is up to us to ensure that the principles of democracy and accountability stand the test of time. I am afraid that they are under severe attack.

When I was a local councillor, a long time ago, we had something called the standards board, which was independent, well respected and robust. There was never any question about whether councillors could go on that and determine their fate or decide whether matters would be investigated. The system upheld the seven Nolan principles and was firm but fair. The Prime Minister does not believe that those kinds of principles can apply to how he judges complaints, but how is it possible that when I was a local councillor, we had a far more robust system? That simply does not stack up.

At the end of the day, the rules should be followed by everyone and should not be changed or watered down in the short term for political convenience. If the Government can avoid the rules whenever they have an inconvenient outcome, how can we tell the public that they have to follow the rules that the Government set? If another lockdown was needed, the incumbent of Downing Street would find it difficult to tell people authoritatively to obey the rules, given what they now know.

Standards should not be seen as something to be avoided or ignored when the going gets tough. Those values have to be central to how we conduct our business. The ministerial code should not be routinely ignored, as it is, nor should it be altered to suit the Prime Minister of the day. We have to be better than that. We have to be an exemplar—a beacon of excellence. We should remember that what we say and do here matters, not just now, but for the future, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) said, because democracy is only as strong as those who are prepared

to defend it. Having seen the empty Government Benches, I do not think that there are enough Government Members who are prepared to do that.

2.55 pm

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who is absolutely right that rules matter. I agree with him, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) that it is disappointing that there are not more Government Members speaking this afternoon, because this really matters to our constituents. Last night, Ministers were quick to say in the media, “Move on; no one cares,” but that is simply not true. No Government Members are here because they also know that this matters.

I have been contacted by several constituents about standards in public life. They think that the Prime Minister has breached their trust, and many think that his actions have been beyond sickening and disgusting. I share their anger about his wilful disregard of the ministerial code and the standards that we expect from our Prime Minister, and about the erosion of public trust in this institution and politics in general.

I serve as a member of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. I do not think that many among the public know much about that Committee or what it actually does, but as Members know well, Select Committees of the House are important bodies. They work well and have long been charged with the scrutiny of Government. We all sit in Committees rooms, off the Committee corridor, week after week, hearing in detail from expert witnesses and, often, members of the public about what is going on in the corridors of power. It is slow, deliberate work that often does not yield headlines.

PACAC continues to run a series of inquiries on propriety and ethics in the aftermath of the Greensill scandal—remember that one? In this debate, we have all resurrected scandals and issues that some of us might have forgotten. It seems incredible that it is only a few months since we had to go through the Owen Paterson debacle. We are conducting a number of inquiries, as well as having one-off regular sessions with leaders of what we can call the post-Nolan landscape bodies.

This is a useful, timely debate in many ways, but in other ways, our Committee wishes that it had come in another few weeks, because we will hear again from the chair of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments in the coming weeks. We will have Lord Geidt, the Cabinet Secretary and the head of propriety and ethics coming before us. We also recently heard from the former independent adviser, Sir Alex Allan, who resigned, and his predecessor. All that evidence is on the website, and all the transcripts are available. Without putting too much pressure on our Clerks and advisers, we will be reporting, as a result of those deliberations, on the general issue of propriety and ethics later in the summer.

I hope that the Government will heed our work and perhaps use the opportunity of this shameful episode in our country's history to start working with the Committee more proactively to ensure that the highest standards are pursued. I also hope that the Government will use the great willingness of the leaders of the organisations



that I mentioned, and of many Members here from across the House, to try to rescue public trust and pursue higher standards. It is now obvious that the whole edifice of what we might call the post-Nolan framework—reliance on the “good chaps” theory—collapses when the chap at the top and the chaps supporting him do not do the right thing.

We are at an extraordinary juncture of our parliamentary democracy. Lord Evans’s response to the Government agreed with Lord Geidt’s report that there was a “low level of ambition”. The report has been quoted a couple of times today, but for hon. Members who have not read it, it really is worth reading in full. Lord Geidt writes about the ministerial code and the work he was asked to do; without impugning him too much, I think he would pass the test for a “good chap” in terms of how he came into the post.

Lord Geidt describes what would be acceptable in normal circumstances, but goes on to say:

“The circumstances of the period covered by my report, however, have been far from normal. For much of the year, the conduct of the Prime Minister himself has potentially been subject to consideration against the requirements of the Code. Accordingly, and whether unfairly or not, an impression has developed that the Prime Minister may be unwilling to have his own conduct judged against the Code’s obligations.”

He describes the

“test for the credibility of these new arrangements”.

He writes:

“It may be especially difficult to inspire that trust in the Ministerial Code if any Prime Minister, whose code it is, declines to refer to it.”

He mentions the fixed penalty notice issued to the Prime Minister, requesting that the Prime Minister

“respond accordingly, setting out his case in public”

as to why he does not think that it

“might have constituted a breach of the overarching duty within the Ministerial Code”.

It is quite an extraordinary introduction to the annual report. In the circumstances of Lord Geidt’s appointment, it is really the strongest reference he could make to what he thinks is occurring.

The new introduction to the ministerial code, which hon. Members have referred to, essentially rejects the idea of anyone being held to account except by having a general election. Obviously the Opposition would welcome a general election at any point; I love elections, and we have had quite a lot of them. It is right that we are held to account by our constituents, but it matters to our constituents that the Opposition come here and hold the Government to account day by day, in Select Committees and with questions, including questions in response to ministerial statements. Constituents do not expect to have to hold the Government to account themselves every few months or, as has been the case, every couple of years when they think that the Government are not upholding the highest standards. That is why we need to rely on statements made at the Dispatch Box having the authority that the country expects. The new introduction gives us another insight, should we need one, into the mind and attitude of the Prime Minister, the Conservative party and this Government. That is why it was so disappointing, and why last night was so disappointing.

There was a lot of discussion about whether Sue Gray’s report would be independent. Let us stop a moment, stand back and think again about how some of what she reported, as a serving civil servant, was so shocking. She writes that

“events should not have been allowed to happen”

but that some of the more junior members of staff felt that what happened was okay because the

“senior leadership at the centre, both political and official”

essentially allowed it to happen. As she says, they

“must bear responsibility for this culture.”

Because of how our constitution now works and how the Government have behaved, all roads lead back to the chap at the top. The culture emanates from there, including non-attendance before Select Committees, late publication of documents and the many other examples that have been outlined today. However, my assurance to my constituents and the wider public is that the willingness we have shown in this place, in this debate and elsewhere, shows that we do love our country and our democracy. We think it can be better than it is at the moment. We will continue to work across Parliament, in Select Committees and in all our different ways to assure our constituents that the integrity, accountability and respect that need to exist in this place will exist again—with or without this Prime Minister.

3.4 pm

**Amy Callaghan** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) on a great speech and on bringing the motion to the House.

We have had cash for honours, cash for contracts and even cash for curtains. This is a Government drenched in dirty money and dodgy deals, and when the truth is laid bare for all to see, they resort to amending the ministerial code, changing the rules to save their skin. The changes made to the ministerial code are transparent and stand in stark contrast to what we have heard from the Minister today. Our constituents can see that the Prime Minister has blatantly amended the code to suit himself and has simply selected the elements of the Sue Gray report that fit his ever-concerning rhetoric. If, as the Minister suggested, all the recommendations had been taken on board, there would have been no need for the motion or for this debate.

The truth is that we deserve better from our elected leaders, and when they do not live up to our expectations, checks and balances should come into effect. They should prevent this very situation. They should maintain faith in our democracy. They should prevent a liar from ever residing in 10 Downing Street. But the system is broken, the scale is askew and only a strengthened ministerial code could set the House to rights.

Where will this end? A lawbreaker is now being allowed to remain as Prime Minister because his own MPs say so. Partying, lying, amending the ministerial code, voter suppression, watering down human rights—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. You used the word “lying”. May I ask you to withdraw it?

**Amy Callaghan:** I withdraw the word “lying”.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Thank you.

**Amy Callaghan:** Partying, amending the ministerial code, voter suppression, watering down human rights: that is a worrying path for any Government to go down, but particularly this Government, given people's lack of confidence in them. "Honour" and "decency" are words of the past instead of the present; they are no longer soundbites that could even be used to describe this UK Government.

This Government have made a mockery of this place, a mockery of the rules that we all lived by and a mockery of us all. Amending the ministerial code to keep in a job is corrupt to the core. I certainly support the motion.

3.7 pm

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): Once again, the Labour party has to use one of our precious Opposition days to debate not the cost of living, NHS waiting times, court delays, falling apprenticeship numbers or any of the other manifest ways in which the Government are failing, but the standards and conduct of the Prime Minister. I do not say that critically—I am pleased that we have chosen to use today's debate for that purpose—but it shows once again why the Prime Minister is not able to get on with it as a result of yesterday's vote: in fact, he is the distraction that prevents this House from moving on. It shows why the 148 of his Members of Parliament who voted yesterday that they had no confidence in him were right.

British parliamentarians have often been asked to go overseas to nations considered to be less developed and provide them with advice about what a functioning democracy looks like. It is not an exaggeration to say that if we arrived as parliamentarians in another country to find that it had a leader whose response to being convicted of breaking the law was not to set about changing his behaviour, but to lower the standards to which members of his Government could be held, we would take a very dim view of that sort of democracy—but that is precisely what is happening here in the United Kingdom.

I have never had any regard for the political priorities of the Conservative party. I do not expect Tory Governments to be good for my constituency or to share my values. But I have respected the fact that, regardless of the difference in approach to matters such as public services and the economy, when it came to the basic rule of law there were things that united parliamentarians of all parties. Under this Prime Minister, I fear that that is no longer the case. That is why it is so important that Conservative Members are willing to be brave enough to stand up and speak out, because some of these matters are more important than narrow party political advantage, and so it is with today's debate; and that is why I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newton Abbott, who resigned yesterday as the Prime Minister's anti-corruption tsar. I think that his letter was of real significance. He wrote to the Prime Minister:

"The only fair conclusion to draw from the Sue Gray report is that you have breached a fundamental principle of the ministerial code – a clear resigning matter.

Butt your letter to your independent adviser on the ministerial code ignores this absolutely central, non-negotiable issue completely. And, if it had addressed it, it is hard to see how it could have reached any other conclusion than that you had broken the code." I think those words are incredibly significant, I think they are brave, and I think the hon. Gentleman should be commended for having written them.

The Prime Minister's own briefing to Conservative Members, which featured widely on Twitter yesterday, suggests that they must tolerate his behaviour because no one else is capable of leading them. I am afraid that too many people are missing the point here. The hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) said earlier that we were raising this issue because we did not like the Prime Minister, and he advocated a system of self-regulation. I think that if Conservative Members look daily at the Prime Minister and think, "There is no one in our whole parliamentary party with 360-odd members who could possibly perform in this way", they must have a pretty low opinion of themselves, and I think that they may be wrong. I also think that the question of standards is not about whether or not one likes a person, but about whether the behaviour that that person has exhibited is tolerable in a functioning democracy, and I am afraid that, in the case of this Prime Minister, it is absolutely not.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): One way to cheat is to change the rules. We have seen the rules in the ministerial code being changed, and we are seeing a general levelling down of standards in public life. The idea that the Government can carry on marking their own homework is absurd. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need an independent commission on ethics and standards in public life, so that there is some accountability?

**Mr Perkins:** I certainly do. That is why I am happy to support the motion today, and why I was happy to support the committee's recommendations.

I agree with Lord Evans that a graduated sanctions approach must go hand in hand with increasing the independence of the adviser. Recommendation 6 states:

"The Ministerial Code should detail a range of sanctions the Prime Minister may issue, including, but not limited to, apologies, fines, and asking for a minister's resignation."

The Paymaster General spoke about that more graduated approach, and I agree with that, but I also agree with Lord Evans that it must go hand in hand with recommendation 8, which states:

"The Independent Adviser should be able to initiate investigations into breaches of the Ministerial Code"

—the Government propose not to heed that—and with recommendation 9, which states:

"The Independent Adviser should have the authority to determine breaches of the Ministerial Code."

That seems to be the point: that the independent adviser determines whether the code has been breached, and it is for the Prime Minister then to decide what sanctions should be applied. What we have now, however, as we heard from the Paymaster General, is an approach whereby if the Prime Minister believes that he still has confidence in people—and I suspect that he will have confidence in the Culture Secretary almost regardless of what she says, because of her slavish support—that is good enough, and no standards are relevant.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), all of us in this place suffer from the allegation that "they are all the same." Despair is the most corrosive emotion possible when it comes to politics, because it leads people to disengage and to decide that there is no point in engaging in politics in any way. The right hon. Member for Orkney

and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) spoke of a cross-party consensus, but how is that possible if the Prime Minister is willing, for political reasons, to overlook breaches of any kind if he thinks that it is in his political interests to do so?

A politically motivated standards regime that allows rules to be rewritten if they become inconvenient, and places the future of Ministers in the hands of the Prime Minister to vanquish or rescue as he sees fit, is not itself fit for the 21st century in a supposedly developed democracy. How can it be that the ministerial code, detailing the way in which those at the very top of the political tree operate, actually lags behind that which applies to MPs, peers and civil servants?

I also support the committee's recommendation for reform of the powers of the commissioner for public appointments to provide a better guarantee of the independence of assessment panels.

Our politics is suffering from a crisis of public confidence, which is particularly dangerous at a time of national economic difficulty such as the one that we are currently experiencing. Only by increasing the independence and clarity of the rules and the rule arbiters can we have a hope of restoring public confidence in our politics, and it is for that reason that I support the motion.

3.15 pm

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I welcome the debate because it is important. Like so many of my colleagues, I want to see the full package of recommendations in the committee's report accepted in their entirety. We must collectively restore transparency and integrity, and improve the accountability of all our institutions. That is why an incoming Labour Government would clean up politics and restore standards in public life, starting by introducing an ethics and integrity commission—a single, independent body, removed from politicians, that would roll at least three existing bodies into one.

Standards in public life should concern us all, as Members elected to public office. It is the highest honour, and the public rightly expect us to exercise the highest of public standards. When one of us breaches those standards, we all lose. One parliamentary scandal reflects poorly not just on the governing party of the time, but on our institutions, our democracy and our willingness to govern in the interests of the British people. That is why the Opposition have tabled a motion asking Members on both sides of the House to back the full package of the committee's recommendations. We have done so because the ministerial code has been cracked by this Prime Minister and his Government. Until now, the code included the "overarching duty" of Ministers to comply with the law and to abide by the seven principles of public life: the Nolan principles, a set of ethical standards which apply to all holders of public office, with the general principle that

"Ministers of the Crown are expected to maintain high standards of behaviour and to behave in a way that upholds the highest standards of propriety."

The ministerial code should be important in providing an essential backstop to prevent the degrading of public standards, as indeed it once did. When viewed alongside the Nolan principles—selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership—the code provides a key cornerstone for standards in our

public life. What is most damaging is that, at a time when the Prime Minister's lawbreaking and industrial-scale rule breaking at the heart of Government have finally been exposed, and at a time when he should have been tendering his resignation, he has instead rewritten the code. I am afraid that the Prime Minister is debasing the principles of public life before our very eyes. He is doing so through careful and calculated manipulation of the rules, bending them to suit his own interests. Now, following the publication of the Sue Gray report, in which she concluded that there were "failures of leadership and judgement in No 10 and the Cabinet Office",

he has concentrated even greater power in his own hands, while weakening standards in public life.

Far from "resetting the culture" of No. 10, the Prime Minister promised following the report's publication, perhaps most self-servingly of all, to end the long-standing principle that those who breach the ministerial code should have to resign automatically. That might save not only him, but all those who would be complicit in these acts. Let us recall that, back in November 2020, the then adviser Sir Alex Allan resigned his post after the Prime Minister disagreed with the finding that the Home Secretary had broken the code. We now have an absurd situation in which the person who breached the ministerial code carries on with impunity, while those who are victims of the breaches feel that their only way out is to resign. The Prime Minister has also failed to outline the concrete sanctions for major breaches of the code. Here again we have the ridiculous situation of the more major the breach, the less clear the sanction. On this side of the House, we support graduated sanctions for minor breaches of the code, but the cherry-picking of sanctions to suit the Prime Minister is plain politicking with standards in public life.

By failing to guarantee the independence of the adviser or allow them to open investigations independently, the Prime Minister has gained a stranglehold over the whole process. He continues to retain the power to veto investigations, stripping the so-called independent adviser of any meaningful power. This is utterly wrong. In the Prime Minister's latest diluted version, integrity, objectivity, accountability, transparency and honesty have all disappeared from the face of the code. These changes, and the lack of changes, have hollowed out the ministerial code and created a centralised, authoritarian Government.

I find it telling that, in one of the letters of no confidence published yesterday, the Prime Minister was accused of importing

"elements of a presidential system of government that is entirely foreign to our constitution and law."

One of the consequences of a centralised presidential system is seemingly the power to do away with accountability, scrutiny and criticism. It is just a shame that more MPs from the Conservative side could not see that last night. If the ministerial code now no longer has the teeth it needs to hold Ministers to account, Labour's call for an independent integrity and ethics commission becomes all the more powerful. Labour has shown before how committed we are to improving standards in public life and we will show it again. Back in 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair widened the terms of reference of the Committee on Standards in Public Life to cover the funding of political parties, and more recently my right hon. and learned Friend the Member

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for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) agreed to do the decent thing and resign if they were found to have breached the covid rules. That is probity, decency and trustworthiness.

It is a sad day for high standards in public life when we have to resort to taking this out of politicians' hands because the current governing party manipulates the process to suit its leader's interests. A failure to act now will see a continuing erosion and degradation of standards in our public life. From Paterson to partygate to allegations of sexual assault, now is the time for Conservative Members to vote for this motion. They could restore public trust in our politics, which would be in all our interests and strengthen the foundations of our democratic institutions.

**Mr Perkins:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I referred a few moments ago to the hon. Member for Newton Abbot but I should have allocated my congratulations to the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) and I would not want them to be misallocated, so can I set the record straight?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Thank you very much for that point of order, and you have done so.

3.22 pm

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): If the House divides at the end of this debate, I shall be voting with the Opposition. Standards in public life are a foundation of our democracy. We must be able to have trust in those in public life, and we need Ministers, and especially a Prime Minister, to adhere to the ministerial code. Breaches of the Nolan principles and the ministerial code affect us all. It is fundamental that those in positions of power are honest and truthful; otherwise, we lose the trust of the public who elect us.

Independence is a word I am extremely fond of—indeed, I am wedded to it for Scotland's sake—but we also need independence because we need a brake on this Prime Minister. He must not be judge and jury on the ministerial code, and I shall lay out my reasoning on this using the Nolan principles. Selflessness—denying yourself what you want for the greater good—is not what our current Prime Minister is noted for. My constituents showed selflessness during the pandemic for the common weal—the greater good. Our current Prime Minister did not. He carried on regardless, and permitted an ethos in Downing Street in which those working for him believed, as he did, that the rules did not and should not apply to them. They allowed guardians and security staff who knew wrongdoing was afoot to be belittled. Nae selflessness, then.

Again, the rules do not apply to the PM. His ethos was, “I want my flat refurbished, but I don't want to pay for it myself.” But donations and loans were not registered with the Electoral Commission during the statutory time limit. Nae integrity there. This Government acted illegally, as judged by the High Court, by having a covid VIP lane to give money to individuals and companies run by friends and donors to the Tory party. Nae objectivity. Then there was the Owen Paterson debacle, where the Prime Minister tried to condone egregious

lobbying and contracts awarded to Tory donors—a running theme. This Prime Minister and his Government believe they can do what they like, and there is nae accountability.

The Prime Minister knew he had attended parties at No. 10, but he used weasel words to try to deny it. He breached the ministerial code by using “terminological inexactitude”. For my constituents' benefit: that is sometimes known by you as lying.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. We are not having the word “lying”. That was stressed by the Speaker at the beginning of the debate, so please will you withdraw the word “lying”?

**Marion Fellows:** I will withdraw the word “lying”, and thank you for your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I think my constituents struggle a bit with “terminological inexactitude”.

How does this Prime Minister deal with breaches of the ministerial code? Simple. You change it, or ignore it. So, nae openness. Partygate damaged our democracy, according to the Health Secretary, and since St Andrew's day last year—189 days ago—we have heard nothing but, “We must move on. The Prime Minister saved us all during covid and he will save Ukraine. Nothing to see here, move along.” No acceptance of wrongdoing apart from set-piece apologies that were allegedly recanted at private meetings of the 1922 Committee. So nae honesty, either. To be a good—or even middling-to-good—leader, you need to have a moral compass. This Prime Minister has a well-hidden moral compass—

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Was the hon. Lady trying to say that certain members of the Government were being dishonest when she said “nae honesty”?

**Marion Fellows:** Yes, I think that the Prime Minister—

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Were you are accusing the Prime Minister of being dishonest? If so, can you withdraw that, too, please?

**Marion Fellows:** Sorry. Yes, of course.

Forty-one per cent. of the Prime Minister's own MPs want him gone, a majority of his Back Benchers want him gone and even the Scottish Tories want him gone. It is worth repeating that former Tory MSP Adam Tomkins, a professor at the University of Glasgow, said:

“When a government asserts that the laws do not apply to it...such an assertion offends not only the law itself but our very idea of constitutional government.”

The former head of the Scottish Tories, Baroness Davidson, said the Prime Minister's position is “untenable.” The Tory party knew what it was getting when it elected this Prime Minister as party leader, as he has a track record.

The current Tory leader in Scotland, the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), has been doing the hokey-cokey on the Prime Minister: in, out, in, out. He has not been able to make up his mind, but apparently he knows now that the Prime Minister should not be in office because he has not exhibited the correct leadership.

We in Scotland have not voted for a Conservative Government for 60 years, but we keep getting them, and this one is the worst so far. The only way forward is

independence. We need to break free of this corrupt Government and their leader, who does not think truth matters and who thinks the rules do not apply to him.

I never expected to be a Member of Parliament, but I have been honoured to be returned three times. During that time, I have seen for myself how the public have lost faith in politicians. We need strong, enforceable standards for those in public life, and we need stronger, more enforceable standards for Ministers, and especially the Prime Minister. We need to build back trust in politics. In Scotland we will do that best by achieving independence; and here we will do it best by supporting this motion.

3.30 pm

**Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): It is somewhat ironic that we are debating standards in public life, given the Prime Minister appears to have no standards and no moral compass whatsoever. It is now blindingly apparent to our constituents that, after many months of rule-breaking, the Prime Minister is fundamentally dishonest, or has at least given the appearance of being dishonest. He is constantly mired in scandal and feels so entitled that he believes his own rules do not apply to him. That is not just Opposition rhetoric or a mere one-off; it is a pattern of behaviour that has emerged not recently but over the past two decades.

A perception of dishonesty, if not actual dishonesty, has been repeated time and again in this House, and it is bringing our democracy into disrepute. My constituents are pretty angry about this. My constituent Dani is angry and contacted me to communicate her disgust at this behaviour. She described her young daughter, who was very unwell during lockdown and who suffers from a rare condition called *listeria monocytogenes meningitis* and severe mental trauma from her ordeal. She told me:

"I can't express my anger and disappointment that Mr Johnson thinks it's acceptable to make up excuses the way he...has done. I no longer have faith... Please pass my story on to whoever that would want to hear it. As I also am raising awareness about *listeria meningitis* because it's a strand that is not known much about... Let's get a Prime Minister in that would treat us as equals. And not feel the need to lie to us. I watch everything, and it doesn't sit well when we all know his apologies are worth nothing."

Another constituent, Anuja, wrote:

"At a time when I was forced to go into labour...with my son on my own without a birthing partner, Boris Johnson and his colleagues thought it was an appropriate time to host a party going against all rules they had set themselves. A few days after I gave birth, my closest Uncle passed away and not only were we unable to attend his funeral, his immediate family were not allowed to see him one last time and had to part ways with him all on their own with not a single shoulder to cry on."

How much more needs to happen before Conservative Members, specifically the 211 who voted to keep the Prime Minister in office, decide to take action and oust him? He has the support of less than a third of the House of Commons. In 1979, before my time, Prime Minister Callaghan, with the support of 310 MPs, called a general election on that basis. Our current Prime Minister has less support than any Prime Minister in living memory.

This situation goes far deeper than partygate. The Prime Minister recently abused the ministerial code by redrafting it to reduce the potential sanctions for Ministers who break rules, and he was castigated by the former local government ombudsman, who served on the

Committee on Standards in Public Life for five years until last December. Jane Martin went on to say that Mr Johnson had wrongly used a report by her committee as a spur to weaken the code.

I remind the Minister of the comments made by previous speakers about ACOBA. The Government are yet to respond to Lord Pickles's letters, sent in July and September, about Dominic Cummings's breaches of business appointment rules. That is exactly why today's motion to back the full package of recommendations by the CSPL would strengthen transparency and integrity, and improve accountability in our democratic institutions. It is only by making those necessary changes, in particular, with the independent integrity and ethics commission, that we can safeguard our democracy and look our constituents in the eye. This would, I hope, mean that debacles such as the Owen Paterson scandal could be avoided in future. The Prime Minister not only defended Mr Paterson's clear and egregious breach of lobbying rules, but, disgracefully, attempted to remove the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards for doing her job. That is behaviour we would expect to see in an authoritarian state, not in one of the oldest and proudest democracies on earth. So it is no surprise that the Prime Minister's own anti-corruption tsar resigned yesterday for those repeated failings.

Just last weekend, the Prime Minister was making obscene hand gestures to shocked members of the public who had taken it upon themselves in the Morito restaurant, Hackney to question his actions. That is the latest in a long line of well-documented offences. What we have seen in the past couple of years is something that, I am afraid to say, has been part of the Prime Minister's character for nearly two decades. In 1990, he was secretly recorded, in a previous job, agreeing to provide the address of the *News of the World* reporter Stuart Collier to his friend Darius Guppy, who wanted to arrange for the journalist to have his ribs cracked as revenge for investigating his activities. That is the true mark of the man behind the door of Downing Street.

Then we come to the Prime Minister's record in public office. In perhaps one of the most scathing assessments of his time as Foreign Secretary, a London Conservative mayoral candidate, Steve Norris, pointed to ill-informed comments of the now Prime Minister that undoubtedly led to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe facing many years in incarceration. Mr Norris' telling comments were that, in addition to being "lousy on detail" during his time as London Mayor, his consistent failure to "read the paperwork" was exactly the sort of behaviour that led to his sloppy and inaccurate comments about Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe. He is not a jovial character, as many of us have been led to believe; this behaviour has affected people's lives for decades, most angering, recently, those hundreds of constituents who did abide by the rules and were not able to be with their loved ones, attend weddings or attend funerals in times of need over the past few months and years.

The Prime Minister has said that it will take a tank division to drag him out of Downing Street, which means that, even after last night's vote, he still is not going to leave of his own accord. So I urge colleagues, on both sides of this House, to continue to explore all options to force this position—to make a change—so that democracy and integrity can be restored, and so that this House can rightfully be restored to its place as

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a pre-eminent symbol of democracy around the globe. If there is an appearance of dishonesty in our Prime Minister, at a time when the country needs to be navigated through the most economically uncertain years ahead that we potentially face, with misery already being caused to millions, surely that trust has to be restored in one way or another. We cannot have someone with their hand on the tiller steering this country who has no trust, from not only this House, but from the vast majority of people in this country.

3.37 pm

**Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): I thank all Members who have contributed to this important debate and to the underlining of the importance of standards, which so many have mentioned. Last night, 148 MPs stood up for standards in public life and it is disappointing not to see more of them in their place today. Each one of us is elected to this place based on trust: the trust of everyone who voted for us; the trust of the British people that we would act with selflessness and integrity in every decision we make; the trust that when the country has to rise to a challenge we in this place would set the highest standards; and the trust that if we were found to be failing to live up to those standards, we would take action, decisively and urgently, with transparency, to rectify that.

The standards system now is broken, so it is up to Labour to bring this motion to push forward the action needed to live up to that trust. The Opposition have tabled this motion now because integrity and trust in politics has never been more under threat. While families up and down the country face the cost of living crisis, they deserve to know who is making the decisions and in whose interests Ministers are acting. These measures are urgently needed to stop the Tory slide into sleaze; to stop the culture of wasting taxpayers' cash to give a mate a lucrative Government contract; to stop the politicisation of appointments from institutions that have never been political before; to regain our pride as a country that stands up for integrity and decency in public life; and to stop rules being made by convention, which can all too easily become a mate's rates version of standards. The wink and a nod; the "He's all right"; the turning of a blind eye; the "Help yourself," "I've earned it," or "Other people do it"—it is all a short journey from bending the rules to breaking them to bringing all MPs and our democracy into disrepute.

The report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life is the focus of the motion. As the committee says:

"Erosion of standards does affect public trust in the democratic process".

The polling and focus group research conducted for the committee found:

"The public have a firm belief that ethical standards are integral to democracy itself, and that politicians have a fundamental duty to the public to abide by ethical codes and rules. However, the public lack confidence that MPs and ministers abide by such standards, and see some politicians as possessing neither the core values expected from leaders in public life, nor matching up to the higher ethical standards displayed by other respected public sector leaders, such as judges, doctors and teachers."

What a state we are in and what action we need to take.

We have heard in the debate excellent speeches laying out the significance of standards. My right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) talked

articulately and movingly about grandmother's footsteps and the stealthy movement to undermine the health of our democracy, and about ministerial standards, control of the media and public appointments.

My hon. Friends the Members for Eltham (Clive Efford), for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) and for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) all underlined the importance of standards and the Nolan principles; the slow death of democracy by the degrading of those standards; the damage done by partygate; and the lack of action up till now.

Today, Labour asks all Members to support the motion—not to abstain, to support it—to recognise the importance of the ministerial code, which has been damaged by the Prime Minister's rewrite last month. The publication of a new ministerial code was the opportunity to include many of the 34 recommendations in the report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life; instead, we got a watered-down code.

In the week when the Prime Minister's misleading denials to Parliament about industrial-scale rule breaking at the heart of Government were finally exposed by the long-awaited Sue Gray report, the Prime Minister should have been tendering his resignation, but instead he was rewriting the rules. He moved to introduce a range of sanctions for minor breaches of the code, a new website and an office for the adviser, but he made no move to make the adviser more independent from the Prime Minister, which was the report's core recommendation.

The Prime Minister's own anti-corruption tsar, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), who is in his place, resigned yesterday, saying it was "pretty clear" that the Prime Minister had broken the ministerial code and:

"That's a resigning matter for me, and it should be for the PM too."

The second focus of the motion is the endorsing of the report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life and its 34 recommendations. Back in September 2020, the committee's review opened with the publication of terms of reference. The starting point was that the existing systems were not fit for purpose and were being increasingly scrutinised and criticised. They were not fit for purpose then and they still are not.

During 2021 there were expert evidence sessions; there was a public consultation; there was an academic roundtable; there was a public sector survey; and there was polling and focus group research. In November 2021, the committee published the report based on all the feedback and all its deliberations. This was not just a small group in a room somewhere, coming up with its own ideas; it was a considered, deliberate report. But we had to wait for seven months for any action at all, and that was the reviewing of the ministerial code. It was seven months of more sleaze and misconduct, including the Owen Paterson scandal, the vote to keep the hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) in Parliament and the failure to act against the former Member for Wakefield. We need to clean up this culture of sleaze and cover-up.

The 34 recommendations include: greater independence in the regulation of the ministerial code, which has been talked about in this debate; strengthening the independent

appointment and remit of the independent adviser; expansion of the business appointment rules to employment by companies with indirect as well as direct relationships with Government; the introduction of meaningful sanctions such as the five-year lobbying ban, because there are just too many loopholes in the current system; and stopping Ministers from overriding public appointments without having to account for why—side-stepping assessment panels means that things can go unrecorded and unnoticed.

We need to know what is happening behind closed doors. The recommendations also include bringing in greater transparency when it comes to who is lobbying whom. We need a central register; a wider definition of who is a lobbyist; and monthly, instead of quarterly, reporting of all lobbying meetings that includes all methods of lobbying, including those on Zoom and WhatsApp.

Those recommendations came out seven months ago. There has been no word on any action for most of them. Earlier, the Minister told us that he would reflect the thinking of the Committee on Standards in Public Life in the rewrite of the ministerial code, but he should not just be reflecting the thinking of the CSPL; he should be including the actual recommendations. If those recommendations are not in the ministerial code, where should they be? When will we see these changes?

This motion today is just the necessary first step. Once the Committee's recommendations are implemented in full, the Government should then do more. Labour would go much further. It would introduce an independent integrity and ethics commission—not a convention, not an adviser, and not another Tory MP. And it would not be in the gift of the Prime Minister to decide whether an investigation is carried out.

This independent commission would bring the existing Committees and bodies that oversee standards in Government under a single, independent body. It would have powers to launch investigations without ministerial approval, to collect evidence and to decide on sanctions. The current system is just too disjointed, too convoluted and too little understood, as the report showed in its polling and evidence sessions. It does not have the transparency or the teeth needed to ensure that high standards are met by everyone all the time, and it is too entirely dependent on the integrity of the Prime Minister—the chap at the top.

I hope that all Members will vote for this motion today. I do not see how they could not unless they are against the ministerial code and against the recommendations on standards in public life. The truth is that standards have not just been diluted under this present Government; they have evaporated. A vote for this motion is a vote to endorse honesty, integrity, and decency. Let us mark an end to the current system right now. This is the line that we should be drawing underneath things. We want an end to the slide away from the highest standards; an end to rule-breaking by Ministers; an end to the revolving door between ministerial office and lobbying jobs; an end to corruption and waste of taxpayers' money; and an end to Members of Parliament being paid to lobby their own Government. Let us clean up politics. Let us win back the trust of the British people and do what we came here to do: to serve the British people without fear or favour and never, ever to compromise on the highest standards of public life. I commend this motion to the House.

3.47 pm

**Michael Ellis:** With the leave of the House and yourself, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to close this debate.

Today has been a useful debate in which valuable points were raised about the importance of high standards in public life—something that, as I have set out, the Government take seriously. The recently published statement on standards in public life set out reforms that provide a measured approach to make certain that the highest standards are maintained, while ensuring democratic accountability of elected representatives to the British people via the ballot box.

As I set out in my opening remarks, the Government will not be able to support this motion. I have heard Opposition Members repeatedly say the same thing. They have said, “We need a break from the Prime Minister”, “We need to change the Prime Minister”, and “We need to change the leadership of this country.” I respectfully suggest that the way to do that is by winning a general election. I have been in this Chamber for many hours over months now, and the Opposition parties have hardly said anything about policies. That is because if they talk about policies, they lose, so they talk about personalities.

Labour's proposal is for an unelected, all-powerful overlord to choose who a Prime Minister's Ministers should be. In theory, therefore, if a Labour Prime Minister—if ever there is a Labour Prime Minister in the future—were to say that they had lost faith in their Minister for the Cabinet Office, that would be one thing; but if they were to say that they had faith in their Minister for the Cabinet Office, but the new overlord were to say that he or she did not, under Labour's plan that person would get to choose who that Minister was. With the greatest respect, I do not think that would make sense.

Looking at the constitutional framework of this country, as the policy statement published by the Government sets out, the constitutional status and framework are a key consideration when we look to make changes such as this. To explain the Government's position here, the Prime Minister's role as head of the Executive means that he has sole responsibility for the organisation of Her Majesty's Government. That includes the recommendation of the appointment of, the dismissal of and the acceptance of any resignation by any of his Ministers. Ministers hold office for as long as they hold the confidence of the Prime Minister.

I gave examples earlier where Labour Prime Ministers retained confidence in a Minister who had been in breach of a ministerial code. The same applies both ways round. The Prime Minister, then, is accountable to both Parliament and the general public for the use of his powers as head of the Executive. As the ministerial code sets out, all Ministers, including the Prime Minister, are in the same way accountable to Parliament and the public for their actions and conduct.

Parliament has an established scrutiny role to play through mechanisms such as Select Committees, oral and written questions and statements. In addition to those arrangements, in our parliamentary democracy the conduct of the Government is ultimately judged by the electorate at the ballot box. I have to say this clearly: the ministerial code is the Prime Minister's document. It sets out his guidance to all Ministers, including him,

[Michael Ellis]

on how they should act and arrange their affairs in order to uphold the principles and standards of conduct set out in the code. The management of the Executive is wholly separate from the legislature.

**Mr Carmichael:** I was struck by the Minister's reference there to an unelected, all-powerful, unaccountable individual; it reminded me that Dominic Cummings was the subject of correspondence in July and September last year between the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments and the Cabinet Office, with regard to his activities post leaving Downing Street. ACOBA has never had a response to that correspondence. When will it get one?

**Michael Ellis:** I am afraid I do not know the answer to that question, but I will certainly look into the matter for the right hon. Gentleman.

In line with the Prime Minister's constitutional role as head of the Government, the Prime Minister is responsible for matters relating to the Executive. That point has been raised by several Opposition Members concerning the justiciability of the ministerial code. The ministerial code and its application are a matter for the Executive, and the Government do not consider that it would be appropriate to legislate for the ministerial code or for the office of the independent adviser. As soon as one legislates in that way, one opens the matter up to judicial review and judicial intervention.

Codifying aspects of the constitution in that way would inevitably constrain our ability as a country to flex and evolve our constitution over time. It would also increase the risk, which as a former Attorney General and Solicitor General is one of my principal concerns, of the judiciary's being drawn into political matters that are not suitable for judicial review. They would be reviewing the fact that a Prime Minister has said, "I have confidence in X", and a judge would, by necessity, be being asked to say that the Prime Minister should have confidence in X or they should not have confidence in X—the judge would be substituting his or her view for that of the Prime Minister. We want to protect the judiciary from being politicised in that way, which is another key flaw in Labour's proposals.

**Karin Smyth:** I have listened to the Minister's arguments. He is essentially saying that all power remains with the Prime Minister—the chap at the top. Given the vote yesterday evening by Members on his own Benches, who are not here to defend him today, what then are we to say to our constituents about the state of play with regard to public trust when the chap at the top has not behaved as honourably as he should?

**Michael Ellis:** The hon. Member and several others keep referring to chaps at the top. It is the Conservative party that has had two female Prime Ministers.

On the hon. Lady's point about the Prime Minister's power, that is certainly not unchecked. The Prime Minister of this country has very considerable checks and balances, given our extremely free and open press and also a House that has an extremely wide array of powers. His powers are not unchecked, by any stretch of the imagination, as I think is obviously clear.

I want to come back to the motion itself, which, as I say, appears to have been built on a misunderstanding of the intentions of the revision to the ministerial code as opposed to the substance of it. As I have set out, the Government are mindful of the constitutional position of the Prime Minister as head of the Executive and his role as having sole responsibility for the organisation of Her Majesty's Government. That means that Ministers must have the confidence of the Prime Minister to continue in their role, and the ministerial code duly sets out the Prime Minister's expectations. The Government are highly mindful of the accountability of Ministers and the Prime Minister within this, both to Parliament and ultimately to the public at the ballot box.

The updates to the ministerial code strengthen it. It is simply wrong to say that they weaken it—that is the opposite of the case. They are intended, in the first place, to enhance the role of the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests, for whom we have considerable respect. They are also to provide what could only be described as a reasonable range of sanctions so that the Prime Minister can discharge an appropriate and proportionate sanction for what might be in certain cases a minor breach, and to include a new foreword reflecting the current priorities of the Government.

These changes follow consideration of the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life in its "Upholding Standards in Public Life" report. We are following those recommendations, alongside consultation between the Prime Minister and Lord Geidt, the independent adviser, and others. As Members can imagine, the Government have carefully considered these and wider recommendations in coming to these conclusions.

I finish by reiterating that the aim of the changes is to even better enable the Government to uphold the highest standards in public life, reflecting the constitutional role of the Prime Minister. Let me once again place on the record my thanks to all those who have taken part in today's debate.

*Question put.*

*The House divided: Ayes 215, Noes 0.*

**Division No. 010]**

**[3.58 pm**

**AYES**

Ali, Tahir	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Carden, Dan
Amesbury, Mike	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Anderson, Fleur	Champion, Sarah
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Charalambous, Bambos
Beckett, rh Margaret	Cherry, Joanna
Begum, Apsana	Cooper, Daisy
Benn, rh Hilary	Cooper, rh Yvette
Betts, Mr Clive	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Blackford, rh Ian	Cowan, Ronnie
Blackman, Kirsty	Coyle, Neil
Blake, Olivia	Crawley, Angela
Blomfield, Paul	Creasy, Stella
Bonnar, Steven	Cruddas, Jon
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Cryer, John
Brown, Alan	Cummins, Judith
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Cunningham, Alex
Bryant, Chris	Daby, Janet
Burgon, Richard	Davey, rh Ed
Byrne, Ian	David, Wayne
Byrne, rh Liam	Davies, Geraint
Cadbury, Ruth	Davies-Jones, Alex
Cameron, Dr Lisa	De Cordova, Marsha



Debonnaire, Thangam  
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin  
 Dodds, Anneliese  
 Doogan, Dave  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Duffield, Rosie  
 Eagle, Maria  
 Eastwood, Colum  
 Efford, Clive  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Farry, Stephen  
 Fellows, Marion  
 Flynn, Stephen  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Foy, Mary Kelly  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gibson, Patricia  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Grady, Patrick  
 Grant, Peter  
 Green, Kate  
 Green, Sarah  
 Greenwood, Margaret  
 Griffith, Nia  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hanna, Claire  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Healey, rh John  
 Hendrick, Sir Mark  
 Hendry, Drew  
 Hillier, Dame Meg  
 Hobhouse, Wera  
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hollern, Kate  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Howarth, rh Sir George  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Jardine, Christine  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Johnson, Kim  
 Jones, Darren  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Kane, Mike  
 Keeley, Barbara  
 Kendall, Liz  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Lake, Ben  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Chris  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Linden, David  
 Lloyd, Tony  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 Lucas, Caroline  
 Lynch, Holly  
 MacAskill, Kenny  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
 Mahmood, Shabana  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Matheson, Christian  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McDonagh, Siobhain  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
 McGinn, Conor  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McLaughlin, Anne  
 McMahan, Jim  
 McMorrin, Anna  
 Mearns, Ian  
 Miliband, rh Edward  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Moran, Layla  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, Helen  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Murray, Ian  
 Murray, James  
 Nandy, Lisa  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Nicolson, John  
 Norris, Alex  
 O'Hara, Brendan  
 Olney, Sarah  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Oppong-Asare, Abena  
 Osamor, Kate

Osborne, Kate  
 Oswald, Kirsten  
 Owatemi, Taiwo  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Mr Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Phillipson, Bridget  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Qaisar, Ms Anum  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Rayner, rh Angela  
 Reed, Steve  
 Rees, Christina  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reeves, Rachel  
 Reynolds, Jonathan  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
 Shah, Naz  
 Sharma, Mr Virendra  
 Sheerman, Mr Barry  
 Sheppard, Tommy  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smith, Alyn  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Sobel, Alex

Spellar, rh John  
 Stephens, Chris  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Stone, Jamie  
 Streeeting, Wes  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Tarry, Sam  
 Thewliss, Alison  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Owen  
 Thomson, Richard  
 Thornberry, rh Emily  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Matt  
 Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Whitley, Mick  
 Whittome, Nadia  
 Williams, Hywel  
 Wilson, Munira  
 Winter, Beth  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Zeichner, Daniel

#### Tellers for the Ayes:

**Gerald Jones and  
 Colleen Fletcher**

#### NOES

**Tellers for the Noes:  
 Lilian Greenwood and**

**Mark Tami**

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House recognises the importance of the Ministerial Code for maintaining high standards in public life; endorses the Committee on Standards in Public Life report entitled Upholding Standards in Public Life, Final report of the Standards Matter 2 review; calls on the Government to implement all of the report's recommendations as a matter of urgency; and further calls on the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to make a statement to the House on the progress made in implementing the recommendations by 20 July 2022, and each year subsequently.

## Children's Education Recovery and Childcare Costs

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I must inform the House that the amendment has not been selected. I call the shadow Secretary of State for Education.

4.12 pm

**Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes it is a year since the resignation of the Education Recovery Commissioner Sir Kevan Collins; condemns the Government's continued failure in that time to deliver an ambitious plan for children's recovery, including supporting their mental health and wellbeing; is concerned that the inadequate attention being paid to childcare, both for the youngest children and around the school day, is allowing the attainment gap to widen and costs to soar for parents at a time when there is significant pressure on household finances; and calls on the Government to match Labour's ambitious plan for children's recovery, including measures to keep childcare costs down for parents while the cost of living crisis continues.

Children's voices are rarely heard in this place, but today I want to put them right at the centre of our discussions. With half-term over, I want to wish the very best of luck to all of the young people sitting exams this week and in the weeks to come. They deserve all of our good wishes, but they deserve far more than that. They deserve to be at the heart of how we think about our country and how we think about the Britain we want to build.

The last two and a half years have been an extraordinary time for all of us—for families, and for schools, colleges, nurseries and universities. I pay tribute to the staff right across the education sector, including teaching assistants, university lecturers, school caretakers, admin staff, childminders, catering staff, everyone who teaches in our schools and colleges, headteachers and nursery workers. So many people deserve recognition, and all parents know it, so I place on record again Labour's thanks to them for all that they have done.

It has also been an extraordinary and challenging time for our children. After all, they only get one childhood, and although experts have lined up to tell the Conservative party how much it matters to put in place a recovery plan for their education and wellbeing—not just for their learning now, but for their futures—still this Government are failing them. That failure and neglect are even clearer today when the Education Secretary cannot even be bothered to turn up to debate the action we need to secure our children's futures. He can spend endless hours touring broadcast studios, praising his lawbreaking boss, who has lost the trust of the British people and his own Back Benchers, but he cannot find time to be here with us today to debate how our children recover from the greatest disruption to their learning and lives in peacetime.

It is just over a year since the Prime Minister's own expert adviser, Sir Kevan Collins, resigned from his post as education recovery commissioner. Sir Kevan's own words on why he felt that necessary were sadly prophetic:

"A half-hearted approach risks failing hundreds of thousands of pupils."

He went on to say:

"The support announced so far does not come close to meeting the scale of the challenge and is why I have no option but to resign."

That is exactly what happened. Sir Kevan repeated his warnings after the autumn Budget, describing the continued lack of an ambitious plan for our children as "incredibly disappointing" and warning that the "meagre measures" the Education Secretary could squeeze out of the Chancellor were a "false economy" that would cost our country dearly in the long term. That warning has been echoed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Education Policy Institute, front-line teachers, parents and so many others. The Education Secretary is fond of telling us that he has been "studying the evidence" but when are Ministers going to start acting on it?

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the lack of funding for education under this Conservative Government started long before covid came along? Funding in my schools on average is down by 6.3% since 2014-15. Does not that show that it is not just covid—this Government have consistently been cutting our children's education?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend is completely right. We have seen year-on-year, real-terms funding cuts per pupil over the last 12 years. I find it incredible that Ministers expect some degree of gratitude for rolling back funding to 2010 levels by 2024-25—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) has something to say, I would welcome hearing it.

**Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I'll tell you later.

**Bridget Phillipson:** That is very generous of the hon. Gentleman—very generous indeed. I am sure we will all be waiting eagerly to hear his contribution.

Let us not forget how important education recovery should be to the Government, and how much it matters to children, to families and to their futures, to our economy, to our country and to all our futures. Almost 2 million of our youngest children have never known a school year uninterrupted by covid. Students sitting their GCSEs this summer lost around one in four days of face-to-face teaching in year 10. Parents, headteachers and nursery managers who I met across the country told me about delays to children's speech and language development, about how children struggle to use a knife and fork, about a loss of confidence in our young people, and about their frustrations at being unable to get children the help and support they so desperately need. They have also warned, as has Ofsted, about the explosion in mental health conditions among our young people. At national level, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has been clear that failing to support our children's recovery now will cost the economy an estimated £300 billion. What bar for evidence do those warnings not meet? Who else needs to tell the Government about the crisis our children face before they finally cotton on? What more reasons do Ministers need to act to protect our children's futures?

The Government have failed our children. We see in the behaviour of Ministers a heady blend of three distinct approaches to the responsibility of Government. Sometimes they do nothing, or sometimes they do not turn up. Sometimes they actively make things worse and sometimes they belatedly accept that the Opposition are right, but not before families and children have paid the

price for their pride. The first two sadly dominate their approach to our children. It has been a pattern throughout recent years. Time and again they have treated our children as an afterthought. We saw that when the support that children needed to learn at home was delayed, and when exams were thrown into chaos for not one year, but two. We saw it over 18 long months of inaction on school ventilation. We saw it when Government Members voted to let our children go hungry during the holidays and—perhaps most powerfully—we saw it when pubs were reopened before our schools.

We saw it in the winter when the Government did nothing for months, even after suppliers warned that the national tutoring programme was at risk of catastrophic failure, and we saw it this spring when we discovered that the Conservatives' lack of interest in our children's outcomes had gone so far as to pay tutors to sit in empty classrooms. We saw it in March when I asked the Secretary of State whether he believed that the delivery of the national tutoring programme had been a success. Even he was unable to provide a simple yes. He knows that it has been a disaster and he is not even here to defend it. We see it now as millions of secondary school students face exams without any support to recover the learning that they have lost.

**Paul Holmes** (Eastleigh) (Con): I remind the House that, if we had followed the Leader of the Opposition's advice, children would have been out of school for even longer. The Government have put £5 billion into catch-up costs for teachers, schools and pupils. From the shadow Secretary of State's magic money tree, how much is the Labour party committing, compared with that £5 billion, in its manifesto?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I must pick up the hon. Gentleman on his first point, which, I am afraid, is simply not right. It is just not accurate, but we know that the Government have a habit of this kind of thing. On children's recovery, I suggest that he looks at the work that the Government commissioned by Sir Kevan Collins, who we can all, right across the House, recognise as an expert in this. The long-term damage to our economy and the costs that our country will face if we fail to get this right now is £300 billion—that is the hit. I assure him that everything that we have set out has been fully costed and I will happily send him a copy.

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): If my hon. Friend would like to find a way to find the £500 million needed on catch-up for children in our schools—not that she needs my suggestions—she could look at the Chancellor giving £800 to people who own two properties. If that was not happening, it would raise £660 million.

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend raises an important point, not least because, throughout the pandemic, we saw vast quantities—billions of pounds—of Government waste, with personal protective equipment literally burnt because the Government had failed to deliver what was necessary. Money was lost to fraud and money was lost in waste. We take our responsibilities on public spending incredibly seriously.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Perhaps another pot of money for the Government to look at is how every pound spent in Her Majesty's

Revenue and Customs on tax fraud delivers £16 back. If the Government were really serious about raising some extra money for important issues such as our children, perhaps they could look at tax fraud, which they seem to be quite ignorant of at the moment.

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight that, as with all these things, it is a question of political priorities. A Labour Government would have prioritised our children's recovery from the pandemic. They would have been at the heart of what we needed to see as we started to rebuild our country. That is what we would have delivered from government.

**Edward Timpson** (Eddisbury) (Con): I will take the hon. Lady back to the closure of schools during lockdown. We now know that that had a profound impact on many children, for a host of reasons. I know that the Secretary of State has said that, in hindsight, the way it was done was perhaps not the right thing to do. First, does she agree with that? Secondly, does she agree that schools should become part of our essential national infrastructure so that we do not close them again should an unfortunate pandemic happen again?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman and I appreciate the expertise that he brings to these issues. He raises an important point about how we plan for the future and look at what worked during the pandemic and what needs to be done differently. I am glad that the inquiry into our covid response will now consider issues around children and schools. That is right and important.

I have a significant degree of sympathy for the very difficult decisions that Ministers faced right at the start of the pandemic when confronted with an unknown virus. We can all remember how terrifying that was; I think it was the right decision when Ministers acted in the way they did. What I find inexcusable, however, is that, from that point, there was no proper plan to get our children back to school as quickly as possible—to use all available methods to do that as safely as possible. I find it incomprehensible that we still do not have a proper plan, but I recognise the hon. Gentleman's point about the need to ensure that, in the event that we see such a terrible situation again, our children are put first. I am afraid to say that they were not during this pandemic.

We see this as schools face eyewatering costs for their energy. A primary school on Merseyside recently contacted me with its electricity bills from April last year and April this year. For April 2021, its electricity bill was £1,514. For April 2022, its electricity bill was £8,145—a rise of more than 400%. Where are the Government, as those costs soar and our schools need help to protect children's learning from rising crisis, to ensure that energy bills are not being paid by cutting back on staff, activities and summer trips, and the quality of children's school lunches? Nowhere. Again and again, we see a Government not leading the way but leaving schools to work out 100 different solutions on their own.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She mentioned school meals. Does she agree that it is a

[Catherine West]

disgrace that only 4p—four pennies—has been spent in terms of an increase on school meals per portion since 2014?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is incredibly important that all our children receive healthy nutritious meals while at school, but also through the holidays. We know so many families are under significant pressure at the moment.

The Government are not just failing our children at school. They are failing our families, not merely through months of inaction but through conscious choices, time and again, to make life harder still for working people. It took five months for the Chancellor to come to this House and set out the windfall tax for which Labour had been calling all that time—five months when families were forking out £53 million a day. Let us not forget that the wider cost of living crisis we face today is a crisis made worse in Downing Street: income tax thresholds frozen, council tax up, national insurance up, petrol costs through the roof, food prices soaring and universal credit support slashed. Again and again, when the Chancellor wants to raise money, he has reached for the pockets of working people.

I have been hoping that the Chancellor's change of heart on the windfall tax might be an omen that the Education Secretary and his Minister might start to heed some of our calls. I cannot but welcome, for example, the Government's belated conversion to the belief that headteachers in our schools, rather than executives and overseas HR firms, are best placed to ensure children get the tutoring they need. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) made that point last summer, when she raised our concerns that the national tutoring programme was being taken out of the hands of education experts and given to a multinational HR company. She asked the Secretary of State and his predecessor whether they were happy with the contract and could provide assurances that it was not a cost-cutting exercise to the detriment of our children's learning. Those assurances could not be given and the contract has failed. At the current rate of progress, all secondary school pupils will have left school by the time his Government deliver the 100 million tutoring hours promised.

The reason the Government veer to and fro from inaction and impoverishment to political larceny, with the Education Secretary cherry-picking his evidence, is because they lack any sense of purpose. As one of the Minister's colleagues said yesterday, the Government lack a sense of mission. They have a majority, but not a plan. Not only does the Secretary of State lack a vision of what growing up in this country should be like, but he lacks a vision of what going to school in this country should mean. That is clear from the way he and his Government have treated our children since the start of the pandemic and the absence of ambition for their futures. It is clear from the lack of care given to the soaring cost of childcare and it is clear from the way they propose to treat our schools.

Taking our children first, as Government should, and as Labour does, children's education has been through three phases during the pandemic. First, when schools closed in March 2020, we asked for daily updates, for information on support for home learning and on how free school meals would be delivered, and the evidence

underpinning the Government's decision making. We wanted to know there was a plan. Sadly, as the National Audit Office found, there was none. Secondly, when it came to school reopening, we made suggestions. We called for ventilation and for nightingale classrooms. We put forward ideas and demanded a plan. Once more, no plan. Thirdly, when we needed a plan for children's recovery and their futures, what we got was a hollowed out, cut-price offer that is failing our children.

Labour has set out a very clear plan for how we would support children's recovery. We would match, not temper, the ambition of our young people. If there were a Labour Government right now, there would be breakfast clubs and new activities for every child: more sport, music, drama and book clubs to boost time for children to learn, play and socialise after so many months away from their friends. There would be quality mental health support in every school, answering the plea of parents and teachers to get professional support to young people now. There would be small group tutoring for all who need it, with trust put in schools to deliver from the start, and ongoing training and development for school staff, because we know that investing in our children's learning means investing in our education profession, too. And there would be targeted investment so that teachers and lecturers can provide extra support to the children and young people who need it most. Critically, our plan would increase the early years pupil premium more than fourfold to drive up the quality of early education and keep costs down for parents.

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the best way to tackle inequalities is to invest in early years? I have first-hand experience of how Sure Start centres made a significant impact on families and children, particularly in marginalised and disadvantaged areas. Does she agree that the Government need to do much more to invest in early years on the scale that Labour invested?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend is exactly right. The last Labour Government transformed early years—we put it first and made it an absolute priority—and I assure her that the next Labour Government will do the same again. Early years childcare and education in this country is too often unaffordable, unavailable and inaccessible.

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My hon. Friend has mentioned the IFS a few times. Is she aware that IFS research last month found that only four in 10 parents of pre-school-aged children had even heard of tax-free childcare and that 40% of families who qualify did not apply because of the Government's "confusing eligibility rules"? Does she agree that in the middle of the worst cost of living crisis on record and rocketing childcare costs, the Government have let children down? The Minister has to explain what he is doing to address these failures to deliver affordable childcare.

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend has consistently campaigned on issues around childcare over many years and I am grateful to her. She is exactly right to raise those concerns, as well as the work that she did in exposing how the Government knowingly and deliberately underfunded the early years entitlement—the 30-hour offer—to parents. I pay tribute to her for that.

The Government are failing parents and children alike, because it is during the first few years that the attainment gap opens up for our children. It is also the first chance to step in and support the children and families who need it. We all see the difference that early support makes—when it happens and when it does not. In power, Labour acted decisively to support families and children, tackle the disadvantage and close the gap. A generation grew up with children's centres. A generation such as mine were supported after 16 with the education maintenance allowance. I saw in my community the difference that those changes made. I see it in the lives of young people who grew up with that advantage, with the support that it unlocked. Some 20 years later, the evidence around attainment and early intervention is clearer and stronger than it was even then, yet the Government have been almost silent. Even before covid, children on free school meals were arriving at school five months behind their peers. That gap is set to grow. It is utterly shameful in Britain in 2022 and a damning indictment of the Government's 12 years in power.

Right now, our children are being failed again in this cost of living crisis. When parents cannot afford to feed their kids, children are being failed. When parents cannot afford to take their kids out for the day and cannot afford an ice cream at the park or a ride at the fair, children are being failed. When mums and dads do not see their kids in the evening or at the weekend because they are working every hour that God sends to pay the bills, children are being failed. When parents skimp on food and are exhausted, without time and energy to spend with their kids, children are being failed. And when the cost of childcare, not just for two to four-year-olds but from the end of maternity leave to the start of secondary school—I am talking about parents being able to choose whether to go back to work; affordable breakfast clubs; after-school activities so parents do not have to rush back for 3 o'clock pick-ups; after-school clubs costing more than women's median wages; and parents paying over the odds for each hour of childcare, because the Conservatives decided that the Government would not pay the going rate for the places they promised—is quite literally pricing people out of parenting, children and families are being failed. That failure is not just about the individual kids and the individual families failed by this Government, although there are millions of them and that is bad enough. Our whole country is failed when we let our children down.

This Government have no plan, no ideas, no vision and no sense of responsibility to our children and their future—the rhetoric of evidence, but no reality. We have responsibility, ambition and determination for our children. We would deliver the plan that children need now, because education is all about opportunity—the opportunities that we give all our children to explore and develop, to achieve and thrive, and to have a happy and healthy childhood. Through a broad and enriching curriculum and education, we can foster a love of learning that stays with them throughout their lives, turning our young people into the scientists, musicians, entrepreneurs, sportspeople and, yes, perhaps even the politicians of the future, generating ideas and innovation that we cannot even dream of.

Education can transform every life, just as it transformed mine. Growing up, we did not always have it easy, but I know that in many ways I was very lucky: I had a family in which I was supported and encouraged to read and

where education was valued. I was lucky to attend a great local state school at a time when the last Labour Government were transforming education across our country. My teachers were fiercely ambitious for me and my friends because they believed in the value and worth of every single one of us. I want every child in every school, in every corner of this country, to benefit from a brilliant education, supported by a Government who are ambitious for their future. That is why we would make private schools pay their fair share—not to tilt the system, as the Secretary of State claims, but to support every child across our great state schools to realise their ambitions.

Today the Minister has a choice. He could stand up and deliver a speech that I suspect we have heard a couple of times before, he could continue the hollow attacks on the last Labour Government, despite no child today having been at school when we were in office—or he could stand up and, like the Chancellor, admit that the Government got it wrong. He could say that they should have acted sooner, but that they will act now to match at last the ambition of Labour's children's recovery plan and put our children and their future first.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I suggest a limit of about eight minutes for Back Benchers, so that we can give everybody equal time.

4.37 pm

**The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker):** I join the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) in wishing all the best to those who are sitting their exams in the coming weeks. It is very good news that those exams are going ahead, and that so far they seem to be going well. I also join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to all in the teaching profession and all who work in our schools to enable teaching. It was a real pleasure to take part in Thank a Teacher Day a few weeks ago and visit schools up and down the country that are supporting pupils well.

We all came into politics to help people to plot a path to a better life. Members will not be surprised to learn that I believe that one of the most effective means to achieve that is a good education. Nothing is more important to a child's future than their education: a good education helps to ensure that all children can fulfil their potential. We are committed to making childcare more affordable and accessible to support parents, as well as providing children with the best start in life.

Education recovery remains a top priority for the Government: it is a key part of building back better, levelling up and making sure that we are ready and skilled for a future in which the next generation can prosper. Helping our children to recover from the impact of the pandemic is one of the Government's key priorities, so we have committed nearly £5 billion to fund an ambitious and comprehensive recovery package investing in what we know works: teacher training, tutoring and extra education opportunities. It is absolutely right that our support is especially focused on helping those who need it most, including the most disadvantaged, the most vulnerable and those with the least time left in education, wherever they live.

**Catherine West:** Of the £5 billion, what proportion will be swallowed up by the inflation in costs of energy for schools, rather than being spent on teachers?

**Mr Walker:** The answer is none, because the £5 billion for recovery is on top of the additional funding that we are putting into schools: the £4 billion coming in for this academic year and the £7 billion over the course of the spending review period. The £5 billion is a targeted intervention specifically for recovery. I will break it down in a little more detail. It includes £1.5 billion for tutoring in schools and colleges, with which we will provide 100 million hours of tuition for five to 19-year-olds by 2024.<sup>1</sup> That is backed by extensive evidence that small group tutoring is one of the most effective tools to support learning and accelerate pupil progress.

**Emma Hardy:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Walker:** I will in a moment.

More than half a million courses have been started by pupils across England, and regionally, the north-west, Yorkshire and the Humber, the north-east and the midlands are leading the way with the highest proportions of participating schools. Now I give way to the hon. Lady.

**Emma Hardy:** I thank the Minister, who is always very generous. If he is looking for something that actually works and has an extremely strong evidence base, I hope he will note that, according to evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation, oracy has a greater impact on children's progress than extending the school day, small group tutoring, or any of the other elements that he has mentioned in connection with the £5 billion. It was disappointing not to see it included in the schools White Paper, and I hope he will revisit the evidence, because if he wants to use something that works, here is something that is ready to go—"oven-ready", one might say.

**Mr Walker:** We believe that oracy is very important as part of an overall strategy supporting literacy, language and development in schools. As the hon. Lady will know, our package includes specific interventions in early language development. However, I have engaged and will continue to engage with her in the oracy all-party parliamentary group, which she chairs.

We have listened to feedback on tutoring, and next year we will allocate all tutoring funding directly to schools, improving the programme's simplicity and flexibility. Great teaching transforms children's life chances, and we know that great teachers are not born but made. That is why we are investing more than £250 million of additional funds to help provide 500,000 teacher-training opportunities through initial teacher training, the early career framework, and our new suite of national professional qualifications. Supporting teachers, including headteachers, throughout their careers is fundamental to delivering the best outcomes for children.

**Paul Holmes:** I thank the Minister for outlining the measures that the Government are taking. When I was a special adviser at the Department for Education, we were constantly hearing from members of the profession about the difficulty of recruiting and retaining good teachers to continue educational attainment through primary and secondary schools. The £3,000 levelling-up premium that has been announced is a vital tool in that regard, but what else can be done to ensure that more good teachers enter the system?

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend is right. It may have been during his time in the Department that it ceased to focus purely on recruitment, and pivoted to focus on retention as well. That was an important intervention and an important change. While the levelling-up premium is indeed a valuable tool in targeting support at the areas where it is most needed, we also need to look at our approach to teachers' workloads, given that the work done before the pandemic managed to reduce unnecessary workloads. We need to look at our wellbeing charter, and we need to look across the board at how we can support teachers. The investment in national professional qualifications, supporting teachers who are mid-career and on their way towards leadership, is a new initiative which the Government have pioneered to ensure that we are investing in members of the workforce not just at the start of their careers, but throughout them.

**Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab):** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Walker:** I will, but then I must make a bit of progress.

**Matt Rodda:** The Minister is being very generous with his time.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) made a good point about recruitment and retention. Can the Minister tell us a bit more about what he is doing specifically to support the retention of these vital public servants, and, in particular, what he is doing to deal with the loss of teachers in high-cost areas? In the area that I represent, in Berkshire, housing and rental prices are very high, but teachers do not receive any extra compensation for that, certainly in Reading, and many heads are concerned about the drift of teachers away from our area.

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Gentleman has raised an important issue. Our reforms of the funding formula to ensure that schools are funded according to the cohorts that they serve and according to their activity are an important element in responding to it, although of course they will take time to come through. However, it is also important that we look at retention more broadly. As I have said, the Department has recognised that in its move towards a recruitment and retention strategy rather than just focusing on recruitment as it traditionally did. I hope that the funds that we are putting into schools this year—a £4 billion, or 7%, increase—will allow them to deliver good pay rises, and will help with teacher retention. Work with the School Teachers' Review Body is ongoing on that front.

Extra time is part of our strategy, and we are increasing the number of hours in 16-to-19 education by 40 per student per year from September 2022. In our schools White Paper we set an expectation that all mainstream state-funded schools should deliver at least a 32.5-hour week, supporting our ambition for 90% of primary school children to achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and maths by 2030, and in secondary schools for the national GCSE average grade in both English language and maths to rise from 4.5 in 2019 to 5 in 2030. The parent pledge set out in the schools White Paper further supports these aims by making clear the Government's vision that any child who falls behind in English or maths will receive the right evidence-based, targeted support to get them back on track.

1. [Official Report, 27 June 2022, Vol. 717, c. 1MC.]

I am sure the House will agree that the earliest years are the most crucial stage of child development. We know that attending early education supports children's social and emotional development and lays the foundation for lifelong learning, as well as supporting their long-term prospects. That is why it is so important that we address the impact that covid-19 has had on the youngest children's social and personal skills as well as on their literacy and numeracy. On top of spending £3.5 billion in each of the past three years on early education entitlements, we are investing up to £180 million of recovery support in the early years sector.

We will build a stronger, more expert workforce, enabling settings to deliver high-quality teaching and helping to address the impact of the pandemic. This includes up to £153 million in evidence-based professional development for early years practitioners—for example, supporting up to 5,000 staff and child minders to become special educational needs co-ordinators and training up to 10,000 more staff to support children in language and communication, maths, and personal, social and emotional development. That includes up to £17 million for the Nuffield early language intervention to improve the speech and language skills of children in reception classes.

Over 11,000 primary schools, representing two thirds of all primary schools, have signed up, reaching an estimated 90,000 children and up to £10 million is included for a second phase of the early years professional development programme in the current academic year, supporting early years staff in settings to work with disadvantaged children.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Minister reels off a lot of statistics, but the most important factor he has acknowledged is how important the early years are. He mentioned levelling up earlier, but the one issue that the Government seem consistently to fail to recognise is the impact that child poverty has on a child's life chances and opportunities. Will the Government acknowledge that without tackling child poverty—which is on the rise, with a third of children living in poverty in my region in the north-east—any effort to invest in later stages education will be undermined, and that they need to tackle child poverty first?

**Mr Walker:** Of course the hon. Lady is right in saying that we have to grow the economy and drive up prosperity in order to support children everywhere; I think that is something we can all agree on across the House. We need to make sure that we are targeting support towards the disadvantaged, and I have already set out that we are. Of course, more broadly we all want to see a stronger economy, and education can play a key part in that.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Walker:** I want to come on to the attainment gap, which has been mentioned, but I will give way one more time.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for giving way. The point that my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) makes is apposite because we know that the vast majority of families picking up on the tax credits to be able to use early years are from

wealthy households, and that a lot of families are being priced out of early years childcare because of the cost. I am sure the Minister would agree that the fact that nearly £2.8 billion-worth of tax credits were unclaimed last year is a problem; if there is a subsidy for childcare, we should encourage parents to take it up.

Does the Minister understand how perplexing the situation is? If it was a priority for the Government, we would see them investing in telling parents about it. For example, the Government spent £35 million on adverts about Brexit in last year, but they have spent £150,000 in total on telling parents where they can get tax credits to cover the cost of childcare. Does he understand the concern about that disparity, and what is he going to do about it?

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Lady makes a fair point. We do want to see better take-up of the offers coming in, and the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), has been working hard on that. Perhaps he will say a bit more about it in his closing remarks, but I recognise the issue. Of course, we also provide a lot of direct funding to the disadvantaged through the two-year-old offer, as I think the hon. Lady will recognise.

We know that the covid pandemic has caused considerable disruption to the education of our nation's children and young people. Evidence shows that that has been significant for all people, in particular the disadvantaged, reversing the years of progress we had seen in closing the attainment gap. The gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers had narrowed, both at primary and secondary levels, between 2011 and 2019, following the introduction of the pupil premium. Despite the impact of covid-19, the latest pupil progress data published at the end of March 2022 shows that we are now seeing good progress for many pupils, but we know that certain groups and age groups need more help.

Since 2021, the additional gaps in attainment created by the pandemic appear to have reduced in primary maths and secondary reading. Evidence shows that, on average, primary pupils recovered around two thirds of progress lost due to the pandemic in reading and around half the progress lost in maths. To mitigate the impact on secondary pupils in key stage 3, we committed to doubling the rate of the recovery premium for secondary schools for the next two academic years from 2022-23. That will help schools to deliver evidence-based approaches to support the most disadvantaged pupils, from small group support in reading and maths to summer schools.

We know that literacy is fundamental to children's education. As mentioned in the schools White Paper, since 2010 the Government have placed the effective teaching of phonics at the heart of the curriculum, introducing the annual phonics screening check in 2012 for pupils at the end of year 1 and incorporating phonics into teacher standards.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Are you Nick Gibb in disguise?

**Mr Walker:** It is great to hear an Opposition Member paying tribute to my predecessor.

In 2018 we launched a £26.3 million English hubs programme dedicated to improving the teaching of reading, with a focus on supporting children who are

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making the slowest progress. In 2019, 82% of pupils in year 1 met the expected standard in the phonics screening check compared with just 58% when the check was introduced in 2012.

**Edward Timpson:** Another Government initiative that helps academic performance, as well as the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of children, is the primary physical education and sport premium, which has been in play since 2013 at the cost of £320 million a year, going straight to primary schools. Will my hon. Friend reassure the House that it will continue into the next academic year? Will he go further in acknowledging the importance of great physical education as a habit for life, within our schools and beyond, by considering making physical education a core part of our curriculum?

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend is extremely experienced in this space, and he is a great champion for physical education and young people. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, who will be closing the debate, is working closely with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care and hopes to have news on this front before too long. I recognise the importance of these issues.

In 2021, we launched the £5 million accelerator fund for English as part of the Government's education recovery package; the fund is targeted at 60 local authority districts identified as most in need of specialist intervention. To date, more than 430 schools have been provided with funding to adopt DFE-validated phonics schemes and the training to implement them successfully.

The Government continue to make sustained investment to support the most disadvantaged pupils to recover lost learning. Building on the flagship pupil premium worth £2.6 billion this year, the recovery premium provides an additional £1.3 billion over this and the next two academic years to help schools deliver evidence-based approaches that will boost progress for pupils with the most ground to make up.

**Tahir Ali** (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Nearly 45% of children in my Birmingham, Hall Green constituency live in relative poverty—more than double the national average. An area of Sparkbrook in my constituency has the highest rate in the region, a staggering 67%. Many of these children come from families that are not in work, and other families rely on universal credit.

Given the cost of living crisis, stagnant wages and the cut to universal credit, this situation is bound to worsen significantly. Does the Minister agree that the Government's current offer is not good enough for the 67% of children living in poverty? Is it not time for the Government to seriously consider expanding eligibility for free childcare, as well as increasing the total amount of free childcare available to families?

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Gentleman raises some important points in what I might describe as an expanded intervention. We want to ensure that we target support at disadvantage, and I am trying to set out the detail of how we are doing that.

As I mentioned, from the next academic year we will maintain the primary rate and almost double the rate for eligible secondary school students, as they are further

behind and have less time left in education to catch up. We have also extended the recovery premium to all pupils in special schools and alternative provision, not just to those who are eligible for the pupil premium, and we have doubled the primary and secondary rates for these pupils in recognition of the higher per pupil costs incurred.

This year, we have also published a new menu of approaches—

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD) *rose*—

**Mr Walker:** I will take the hon. Lady's intervention in a moment, if I may finish this point first. As I was saying, this is making it easier for schools to identify and embed the most evidence-based, informed practices and interventions, which will have the greatest impact on disadvantaged pupil outcomes—

**Emma Hardy** *rose*—

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Lady mentioned the important work of the Education Endowment Foundation, and she is right to do so, because the EEF's endowment, all those years ago, has proved very valuable for the sector. It has built an evidence base on which everybody, across parties and across different parts of the educational community, can agree.

One really important intervention we were able to confirm in our White Paper is the £100 million re-endowment of the EEF so that it can continue its work, making sure that initiatives such as the recovery premium and the pupil premium are as evidence-based and effective as possible. I am now going to take the intervention from the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) because I promised to do so.

**Munira Wilson:** I thank the Minister for giving way. He talks about helping the most disadvantaged and about the pupil premium. Will he acknowledge that the pupil premium, which I am sure he will acknowledge was a Liberal Democrat policy delivered in coalition by us, has been cut in real terms since we left government and the Tories took over on their own—by £160 per secondary pupil and by £127 per primary pupil? Any recovery or catch-up premium is being swallowed up by all the inflationary costs, because the pupil premium has not kept up with inflation.

**Mr Walker:** Pupil premium funding rates are increasing this year by 2.7%. They are reaching the highest level in cash terms that they have ever been, and that is a proud achievement. Yes, the pupil premium was agreed during the coalition Government, but we have continued to invest in and support it, and we have added the recovery premium on top of that.

**Emma Hardy** *rose*—

**Mr Walker:** I have a lot to say, so I am going to make a bit of progress now. I have taken an intervention from the hon. Lady already.

Regular attendance at school is also vital for children's education, wellbeing and long-term development. Our priority is to maximise the number of children regularly attending school. We recognise that the lessons learned during the pandemic must help us to strengthen and improve the overall system, which is why we recently



published guidance for schools, trusts and local authorities, setting out how we expect them to work together to improve attendance.

The Secretary of State has also established an alliance of national leaders from education, children's social care and allied services, who have taken pledges to raise school attendance. That includes work by Rob Tarn, the chief executive officer of the Northern Education Trust, a multi-academy trust serving areas with high levels of disadvantage, to work with other trust leaders to identify and disseminate best practice. Alongside that, we are running a series of effective practice attendance training webinars, which have been accessed by more than 12,000 school staff so far. Our team of expert attendance advisers also continues to work closely with a number of multi-academy trusts and local authorities with high levels of persistent absence to review their current practice and develop plans to improve.

I am pleased to confirm that legislative measures to establish a registration system for children not in school were included as part of the Schools Bill introduced by Parliament on 11 May 2022, which is currently in the other place. These measures will help local authorities to ensure that all children are safe and receive a suitable education. Through our attendance action alliance, the Children's Commissioner has also begun a review to understand more about children missing education, and where and why they may be falling through the gaps. She has consulted the alliance on her initial findings, but her review is ongoing.

We know that the worries that children and young people may have about their progress at school and how this affects their future are important factors in their wider wellbeing, and subject learning is part of what children and young people enjoy most about school. That is why the additional support we have put in place to ensure that children feel supported in their education, and on track with their learning and wider development, is so vital and integral to their mental wellbeing.

I wish to be clear that children and young people are not alone on this journey and the onus is not on them to catch up; it is something that the whole school and the whole education system is looking to achieve together. It is our priority to support education settings to do so. The things we are doing to support schools are reflected more widely in our schools White Paper.

We have provided specific support for teaching about mental health and wellbeing as part of health education. Taking part in enrichment and extra-curricular activities is well known to support children's wellbeing, but we know that participation fell during the pandemic. The longer, richer school week that we are securing through the White Paper will help to ensure that all pupils have the chance to have a wide range of experiences, including in sport, music and the arts, and we are supporting the expansion of opportunities to take part in specific schemes such as the cadets and the Duke of Edinburgh award.

We are also updating our behaviour in schools guidance to support schools to create calm, safe and supportive environments, which are important to pupil mental health and wellbeing. The guidance recognises that reasonable and appropriate adjustments may need to be made for pupils and that schools may wish to ensure that their staff are trained on matters that may affect pupils' behaviour, including special education needs,

disability or mental health needs. The guidance also makes it clear that following a behaviour incident staff should take into account any contributing factors and whether a pupil has mental health needs, and consider what support is required.

**Matt Rodda:** I am grateful to the Minister for his time. In a very difficult incident in my constituency, a young boy was brutally stabbed—the Minister may well have come across the case some time ago. I have received from a retired teacher who used to be a local education authority adviser a fascinating suggestion that I wish to put the Minister: is it possible to include in personal, social, health and economic education warnings about knife crime, and education about its dangers and the combination of the threat of knife crime with social media, which happened in the tragic case in my constituency? It seems to me to be a worthy and important idea to explore. It is complicated so I would not expect the Minister to give an answer right now, but is he willing to write to me on this important matter?

**Mr Walker:** I am happy to do that, and if it would be helpful, I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to follow up and talk through that case in a separate discussion, because it sounds like an important case.

To ensure that schools are able to put in place whole-school approaches to mental health and wellbeing, we are providing £10 million to extend senior mental health lead training to even more schools and colleges. That training will be available to two thirds of eligible settings by March 2023 and to all state schools and colleges by 2025.

The Government are expanding and transforming mental health services for all, with additional investment of £2.3 billion a year through the NHS long-term plan. As part of that work, we are funding mental health support teams to provide specific support, to make links to other health provision and to help to support school staff to deal with issues. Because of the £79 million boost to children and young people's mental health support that was announced in 2021, some 2.4 million children and young people now have access to a mental health support team, and more teams are on the way, with numbers set to increase from 287 teams today to more than 500 by 2024.

I recognise that people throughout the country are worried about the impact of rising prices, with many households struggling to make their income stretch to cover the basics. Although we cannot insulate people from every part of cost rises, we are stepping up to provide support, as we did during the pandemic. This year alone, we are increasing core schools funding by £4 billion compared with 2021-22. That is a 7% per-pupil boost in cash terms that will help schools to meet the pressures that we know they face, especially in respect of energy costs and pay.

I recognise the strength of feeling when it comes to our childcare system. We want families to benefit from the childcare support they are entitled to, thereby saving them money and helping them to give their children the best start in life. I am proud to be part of a Government who have extended access to early education and childcare to millions of children and parents over the past decade.

In 2013, the Conservative-led coalition Government introduced 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds. So far, this has helped more than 1 million

[Mr Robin Walker]

children to get a much-needed boost to their early education. To ensure that all children are ready for school, all three and four-year-old children continue to be eligible for 15 hours of free early education a week, and nine out of 10 took up the entitlement last year.

In 2017, the Conservative Government announced 30 hours of free childcare for working families, to save families up to £6,000 a year. Because of that, thousands of parents have been able to return to paid work or increase their hours, while saving thousands of pounds a year. We have also introduced tax-free childcare, which provides working parents with up to £2,000 of support to help with childcare costs for children under the age of 12. With universal credit, parents can claim back 85% of eligible childcare costs, compared with 70% under the old system.<sup>1</sup>

We invest a significant amount of funding in early education and childcare, including more than £3.5 billion in each of the past three years on early education entitlements for two, three and four-year-olds. In 2022-23, we have increased the hourly funding rates for all local authorities—by 21p per hour for the two-year-old entitlement and, for the vast majority of areas, by 17p per hour for the three and four-year-old entitlement.

**Stella Creasy** *rose*—

**Mr Walker:** I give way to the hon. Lady one more time.

**Stella Creasy:** Many parents listening to the debate might have a simple question for the Minister: what does he expect them to do with a child who is under the age of two, so that we do not see women in particular having to leave the workforce because no employer is going to wait two years for them to have childcare?

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Lady raises an important point. As the parent of a nine-month-old, I definitely recognise the challenge. [Interruption.] The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, refers to the support that is available through tax-free childcare and universal credit, but of course we recognise the challenge. I have to say that I do not see anything in Labour's plans that would fix it.

To support childcare for families with school-age children, the Government are investing more than £200 million a year in our holiday activities and food programme. The programme provides free holiday club places, with healthy meals, enriching activities and free childcare, to children from low-income families, benefiting their health, wellbeing and learning. Last summer, our programme funded free holiday places for, in total, more than 600,000 children and young people in England, including more than 495,000 children who were eligible for free school meals. That means that hundreds of thousands of children from low-income families are benefiting from healthy food and extracurricular activities, thereby helping to level up children's educational outcomes, provide better nutrition and improve their wellbeing, behaviour and social skills.

The Government are continuing to invest more than £200 million a year in the holiday activities and food programme, with all 152 local authorities in England delivering the programme. We are also committed to continuing support for school breakfast clubs. The Department for Education is investing up to £24 million to continue its national school breakfast programme

until July 2023. This funding will support up to 2,500 schools in disadvantaged areas, which means that thousands of children from lower-income families will be offered free nutritious breakfasts to better support their attainment, wellbeing and readiness to learn. The enrolment process is still open to schools that wish to sign up to the national school breakfast programme.

We recognise that we must ensure that childcare works the best it can for families' lives now. The Government are committed to continuing to look for ways to improve the cost, choice and availability of childcare. With safety and quality at the heart, as a first step we will consult on ratio requirements by the summer to give providers more flexibility and autonomy to make decisions about their settings and the needs of their children. We will continue to work across Government to ensure that parents are given the information that they need to access support from tax-free childcare, universal credit, and other entitlements. We will actively consider how we can ensure a sufficient supply of childminders, giving more parents access to an affordable and flexible type of childcare, as well as creating further flexibilities to enable parents to be able to spend Government funding on childcare that best meets their need.

The Government are committed to helping families and giving every child the best start in life, and we back that with significant investment at the spending review. We are investing £695 million in the Supporting Families programme to provide targeted support to 300,000 of the most vulnerable families. We are also providing a further £600 million for activities and healthy food for children in the school holidays, and we are delivering on our manifesto commitment to champion family hubs. Family hubs bring together services for children of all ages. We will invest £302 million to transform Start for Life and support local authorities to create the network of family hubs in 75 local authorities across England.

I am proud of our record in supporting children and young people both before and during the pandemic. The Government have ensured that supporting our children and young people is at the heart of our recovery plans, with the latest evidence suggesting that real recovery is taking place. Those on the Labour Front Bench have no plan other than to keep promising more of other people's money. Nowhere in their proposed plans are detailed costings of their proposed interventions on childcare. We will continue to follow the evidence and provide investment where it makes the greatest difference.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. Both Front-Bench speakers have been incredibly generous in taking interventions. Some of those interventions have been quite long, which has put a bit of pressure on time. That makes it even more important that we help each other out, so that I do not have to impose a time limit. The eight-minute limit has become a bit more like seven.

5.7 pm

**Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op):** I am delighted that we are having this debate today, because, frankly, it is long overdue. Indeed, in the past couple of years, this place has debated wind turbines more than it has debated the future of childcare in this country. We can all make the jokes about hot air, but the reality is that our children deserve better.

1. [Official Report, 27 June 2022, Vol. 717, c. 2MC.]

I want to focus my remarks particularly on this question about childcare costs. According to the TUC, one in three parents with pre-school children are spending a third of their pay on childcare. The cost of a full-time nursery place for a child under two—those children whom we do not seem to know what to do with—has risen £1,500 over the past five years. The honest truth is that these challenges are not about the pandemic. They pre-empted the pandemic; they have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Our childcare system is more dysfunctional than the Home Office. We have to ask ourselves what we can do to fix it. Having the debate is the first step. Again, I want to declare that I am a big fan of the “Derry Girls” and “Countdown”, but we have spent more time, particularly in the Queen’s Speech, thinking about privatising Channel 4 than we have about sorting out childcare.

Childcare in this country does not work for the children, especially if they are aged under two, because they do need more than a packet of crisps and a pint of coke during the school holidays. Parents face bills running to hundreds of pounds a week for at least the first two years, often pricing all but the wealthiest out of the workplace. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds feel the pinch most of all. They are already 11 months behind their peers when they start primary schools because many of them cannot be in childcare to get that early years learning that we all said is so important. We know that that has got worse during the pandemic, with 76% of schools reporting that that cohort of children—the children from the poorest backgrounds—needed additional support compared with the pre-pandemic cohorts.

Even when the Government do invest in childcare, it does not get any better, particularly if parents have a child who might need care during the school holidays. Parents are spending over £800 a year more for after-school care than they did in 2010, with the average family spending more on these activities than they do on their weekly shop. Little wonder that this childcare system does not work for parents or for employers, who are losing talent from our economy at a rate of knots. Some 40% of mothers have said that they had to work fewer hours than they would have liked because of childcare costs, and that figure rises to more than half of women in households on incomes of less than £50,000.

This weekend alone, we saw evidence of a jump of 13% in women aged 24 to 35 not working in the past 12 months. It does not take a rocket scientist to work out who those women are, but it does take a Government who want to prioritise families—I say families, because we know that dads are getting a raw deal too. The mums are disappearing and the dads cannot be there for their kids as they want to be either.

The uptake of paternity leave in this country has dropped to a 10-year low, with only one quarter of new dads choosing to take it. Let us be clear what they are taking: two weeks. Anybody who has had a new-born knows that it takes a lot longer than two weeks to work out what on earth to do with it. Just 27% of eligible fathers are taking up that offer of just two weeks’ paid leave, down from 170,000 in 2021, compared with 650,000 women who took maternity leave, although many of them then faced the discrimination of not being able to return to work. That is a loss of 100,000 men compared with those who took paternity leave in the previous year. The number is falling.

A separate study by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development showed that more than three quarters of men feel there is a stigma to taking just those two weeks to care for their children, let alone asking for flexible working. Where does that stigma come from? I do not know. Maybe somebody could leave a note on my desk to tell me why caring for children and wanting to have a career is a bad thing.

Employers want to be able to offer these things, because employers and businesses are ahead of the Government here. They know that offering flexible working, helping families to work and have a career but also be able to care for their children, is one reason why many of their employees stay with them.

The current situation does not work for Government or those running nurseries—those heroes we all know who look after our children. National Day Nurseries Association data shows that the Government is the biggest purchaser of places, but they are frankly short-changing the industry hand over fist. Providers are making a loss of £2 an hour on every Government-funded child they take, forcing them to cut their margins, underinvest in staff and overcharge other families to try to make ends meet.

Even when childcare is subsidised, it does not work. The estimated shortfall in funding for a three or four-year-old is more than £2,000 a year, and it is nearly £895 a year for a two-year-old. Little wonder so many nurseries are going out of business and childcare is increasingly becoming an indulgence of the middle classes, rather than part of the infrastructure of an effective economy.

In this debate, it is parents who we do not hear from in this place most of all. I pay tribute to the amazing work that Joeli Brearley and Pregnant Then Screwed, and people such as Anna Whitehouse at Mother Pukka, are doing in giving a voice to real parents. These are genuine comments I have had in the past week alone:

“Nursery fees for two kids cancel out my whole wage. My employer is consistently in the top 10 global best employers (they are great) so if I can’t make it work, god knows how others do.”

“All my wage goes on childcare for two days a week, which works out at the same price as rent for a flat.”

“I’m a teaching assistant. My monthly nursery fee for 4 days a week is £300 more than my entire monthly salary—I’m lucky to have a supportive family who help me with some of the cost, otherwise I wouldn’t be able to work. I’m trying to complete my teaching degree, make a career for myself and support my child, but my god do this government make it so hard!”

“£1870 a month for 5 days a week for me to pay childcare to return to work. More than I earn!”

“This summer it’s going to be a nightmare trying to work and find affordable childcare for an 11-year-old, 5-year-old and 3-year-old.”

“I attempted to re-enter the workforce once my twins were in reception—I had to give up as there was no childcare provision during the summer holidays of 2021. I wasn’t expecting to still be at home when the children were 7.”

“No one warns you or helps you pay £2,400 per month in childcare so that you can go back to work. I’ve always been a career woman, so why should we have to choose?”

“I have returned to work 4 hours a week to fit around my partners working hours. If I returned to my normal hours I would take home less than £10 a day, minus the cost of petrol. Totally ridiculous that there is no help until the age of 3.”

“Cheapest nursery I found within walking distance of my flat was £1603 a month!”

[Stella Creasy]

“The worst thing about this is that it is seen as the status quo. A justification for pregnancy and parental discrimination. So we get hit twice. No career and blamed for it too. I now work freelance and when I was hired by a client in the same profession for private work, they had assumed I had left an office to start a family.”

The truth, though, is that those experiences are not the worst thing—the worst thing is that investing in childcare is not a loss leader; it is a benefit to our economy because of the increase in tax take, the lower universal credit that is paid, and the equality, prosperity and productivity it brings to us all. Free universal childcare from the end of parental leave to the start of school would bring £25 billion extra funding into the Exchequer through those factors. That would cover 90% of the additional cost outright. But instead of investing, we have a Government murmuring about trying to cut corners by tweaking childcare ratios. I say to the Minister—he and I have children of a similar age—that, if he wants to take five kids of that age at the same time, I will happily lend him mine so that we can see just how possible that is. Our economic competitors recognise that this is the wrong way round as well. Some people claim that they have higher ratios, but we already have higher staff to child ratios than other similar countries. We have 13 children for every staff member in pre-school compared with six children in Sweden and eight in the Netherlands.

As I said, there is money to spend on childcare, but this Government are not spending it. It is our money as taxpayers. Those tax credits could be a valuable part of helping parents to make ends meet when it comes to childcare. The Government are not telling people that they are entitled to tax credits, yet the Government got back £2.8 billion alone last year in unclaimed childcare tax credits. If the Minister needs people behind him to go to the Treasury to demand that money back, I am with him, because that money alone would pay for 500 million hours of childcare as a first step towards having a universal system. But I do not hear any evidence that the Department is going to claim our tax money back so that our children can have that childcare.

The truth is that we cannot solve the cost of living crisis without solving the cost of childcare. We cannot have a productive economy unless every single talented person can make the right choice for their family about working life. A party cannot claim to be the party of the family when it is abandoning particularly mums but dads too. The Minister knows that he could have support to do this, but we need it to be a priority, even more so than saving “Derry Girls” and putting up the wind turbines.

5.17 pm

**Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I warmly thank the teachers, teaching assistants and support staff of schools across the entirety of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. I also send my best wishes to the students on their upcoming GCSEs and A-levels. If they have worked hard enough, and I am sure they have, they will reap the rewards in the summer.

The Minister outlined a raft of figures—important figures, because a serious amount of money has gone into education, particularly to help with education recovery. Let us look at just a few examples. There is the £400 million going into equipment for remote education and the

funding of £5 billion for the catch-up education recovery plan, which includes the £200 million a year holiday activities and food programme. That is a fantastic scheme that not only provides a meal for students on the day but makes sure that they have the physical and mental education that is so important to making sure that those who have free school meals, in particular, do not fall behind in the summer weeks; we know from the statistics that, on average, it is seven weeks once they start the academic year. Helping to bridge that gap is so important.

We have seen in the great city of Stoke-on-Trent the Minister for children and families, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), hear the call for a family hub. I am looking forward to rolling out family hubs across the city, particularly in Tunstall town hall. They will not only help parents, particularly those on low incomes, to get the support that they rightly deserve and make sure they give every child in their family the best start in life, but make sure that those young people get the early years education that is absolutely critical to a person's future life chances.

On top of that, Stoke-on-Trent was awarded a priority education investment area, which means that we are going to see not only £30 million in additional funding, plus some more, coming to our area, but a new specialist 16-to-19 free school and more resources to ensure that the city of Stoke-on-Trent no longer lingers in the bottom 20% for educational outcomes and destinations.

In Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, we sadly face the statistic of being 7th worst for children going on to higher education. That is no fault of a Government but sometimes the fault of a system that does not have in place the support network for families to encourage a young person to take that big, important step; they may well be the first in their family or the first in a generation to take it.

I want quickly to talk about the holiday activities and food programme. We have the fantastic Hubb Foundation, led by the mighty Carol Shanahan OBE, who, as chair of Port Vale football club, saw that mighty club win the Wembley league two play-off final and had Robbie Williams for his home-coming concert at the weekend. With her fantastic team, also led by Adam Yates, a former professional footballer, she has supplied thousands of opportunities for activities during every single school holiday. The Minister for children and families was gracious enough to come to Stoke-on-Trent South and Stoke-on-Trent North to see those in action and to engage with Carol and Adam on the great work they are doing. On top of that, at a time of national need, they provided nearly half a million meals across the city of Stoke-on-Trent to children and their families while we were in lockdown. In 2021 alone, the foundation held 1,211 sessions, with 4,688 delivery hours, and provided 57,154 meals. That programme is a UK-leading holiday activity and food programme, and I hope that the Government will always recognise the fantastic work that is done in Stoke-on-Trent.

We also have the fantastic Charlie Rigby, from the Challenger Trust. Charlie has been working with local academy trusts such as the Alpha Academies Trust, led by Simon French. They have come up with a scheme where they will lock off £150 each year for all students on pupil premium. That will give those students the enrichment and extracurricular activities they rightly deserve and need, and, Minister, the trust is simply

asking for an extra £600,000. We could then pilot the scheme further within the city of Stoke-on-Trent to extend it beyond those students with pupil premium and show the long-term benefit, as well as provide an extended school day, which the Department knows I am a huge supporter of.

I am also a big supporter of shortening the summer holiday to help those childcare costs. In a report I did with Onward, we estimated that that would save £266 each year to parents just in childcare costs, not including any salary loss from parents having to take time off work or no longer being able to be in work, as well as helping to prevent students from falling further behind, particularly those on free school meals. Those are the types of things we should be considering.

I appreciate that you want me to stick to time, Madam Deputy Speaker, so in summary, I heard the shadow Front Bencher and I do not recognise their picture of education. I spent eight and a half years in the classroom working in the state education sector, both in Birmingham and in London, and I loved every single minute of it. What I do not understand is why Labour Members are yet to answer questions about why they were anti-phonics for so long, why they were anti-Ofsted at the last general election in which they were elected, why they are anti-academies such as the fantastic Michaela Community School led by the brilliant Katharine Birbalsingh, and why they are anti-free school. Well, not all of them are. The hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) was a big fan of this Government providing a free school to the people of Radcliffe. I know he warmly welcomed it at the time, when he was on the Conservative Benches. I am sure that he continues to welcome it on every leaflet he has put out in his local area since.

It is great to see that the Government are rolling out that fantastic free school programme. We need far more. The Minister knows that I want to know when wave 15 is coming, and it had better be coming soon because I am desperate to make sure that we have a new 11-to-16 school in Stoke-on-Trent, particularly for the people of Ball Green and that area, which is not served locally enough by a decent secondary school. We need to see some of the best multi-academy trusts coming into the city of Stoke-on-Trent, such as Star Academies and the Northern Education Trust, and I hope that the Minister will assist me with that to ensure that we see the changes we need.

Ultimately, this is a Government who are taking education seriously. We know that if we get education right levelling up will be a true success and all the new jobs that we are creating across the country—including the nearly 2,000 that we have already created since 2019 just from this Government alone, as well as the 8,000 that Stoke-on-Trent City Council, which is Conservative-led, has created in the past six years—will be filled by Stokies, because they will get the best education. It is this Government who are taking them seriously.

5.23 pm

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Both you and I know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that academies were the policy milestone of a Labour Government, because we both had the opportunity to vote for them and see them introduced. So I suggest that we will take no lessons about academies from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis).

The Government repeatedly argue that the best way out of poverty is work, and I for one would never disagree with that. I would go further. I think it is morally important. It is important for health. It is important for people's children to watch them go out to work. The rhetoric is only ever as strong as the practical reality, however, and that reality could not be clearer. Prohibitive childcare costs mean that ever more women are being priced out of the labour market and out of the opportunity to make a better life for themselves and their children. As we have already been told, the average cost of a full-time nursery place for a child under two has risen by almost £1,500 in five years, and 40% of mothers now say that they have to work fewer hours than they would like because of childcare costs.

Against that backdrop, I was delighted to take up an invitation from the Social Market Foundation to join a new cross-party commission on childcare, co-led by the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose). Our aim is to analyse the stark impact of poor childcare provision on wages and poverty, and to consider cross-party the changes that are desperately needed. Today's debate is timely, as our first research was released this week and reveals that women who had a baby in 2010 have in the decade since missed out on a staggering £70,000 almost. That is not their costs, but the income they have lost relative to what would have happened if they had remained childless—£70,000.

But should we be surprised? The charity Pregnant Then Screwed found that more than a third of mothers who return to work make a financial loss or break even, and that 62% of parents said that their childcare costs were the same as their rent or mortgage. If they cannot afford the childcare costs of returning to work, or if those costs outweigh the salaries they would bring home, work simply does not pay—no matter how many times the rhetoric is repeated at the Dispatch Box.

Meanwhile, this weekend's *The Sunday Times* revealed that Britain shamefully leads the way when it comes to net childcare costs, which represent 29% of income. That compares with 11% in France, 9% in Belgium and just 1% in Germany. We are statistically one of the most expensive countries in the world in which to raise children. The problem is getting worse: the reality is that the number of women aged 25 to 34 who are not working has jumped by 13% in the last year.

The cost to women, children and society is about more than money. It is about missed promotions and career progression for women who cannot afford to return to work. It is about the consequential worsening of gender inequality. It is about the lost learning and the widening of the attainment gap because of the unaffordable costs of before and after-school clubs. Meanwhile, according to the Women's Budget Group, the cost to economic output of the 1.7 million women prevented from taking on more hours of paid work due to childcare issues is a mind-boggling £28.2 billion every single year.

The importance of the early years must never be underestimated, but how far this Government have fallen. Under the last Labour Government, education was so important that we said it three times—and our rhetoric matched the reality. Some 3,500 Sure Start centres were delivered on time and offered a place in every community for integrated care and services for children and their families.

[Siobhain McDonagh]

The situation is clear: we know the importance of the early years. We know that parents are being priced out of childcare and that an increasing number of women are not returning to work because they simply cannot afford to. We know that we have a problem in the entire economy with people withdrawing from the employment market and that the consequential cost to society is extortionate. If only we had a Government who recognised the importance of affordable childcare as the solution that threads so many of society's injustices together.

5.29 pm

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. We all have a calling as MPs, and I was driven to get involved by social mobility. I went to a school at the bottom of the league tables and I lost my father at an early age, and I have always recognised that if we get this area right—the things we have all been discussing; despite the partisan speech of the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), we are united on much of it—it can unlock potential and allow people to progress in life.

I have now served 23 years representing my community, initially with a Labour council and a Labour Government and now with a Conservative council and a Conservative Government, so I have seen both sides. Neither got it all right and neither got it all wrong, but the reality was that schools were built late under the Labour regime, and when we did get them, they were through the private finance initiative. They came with huge extra costs and were limited in their ability to meet changing demands, particularly when numbers increased.

Under our Government, we have delivered a swathe of new schools, including the new £23 million Great Western Academy—bizarrely opposed by one of the former Labour shadow Secretaries of State for Education—which is now full, and we are seeking to expand. This is making a difference to parents: 91% of parents in my constituency, in the top 10 in the country, are now able to secure their first choice school. What a contrast to when I used to have to go to public meetings to see the anguish and the anger of families who were being robbed of the opportunity to have the school they deserved to which to send their children.

As a big supporter of the free schools programme, I have some—I hope, constructive—asks. First, I think the welcome consolidation of multi-academy trusts helps with the pooling of resources, training, recruitment and career progression for teachers, but I think it should go further. When we consider large new school sites, we should look to consolidate the offerings, so that we do not just have traditional secondary schools, but perhaps have university technical college provision, grammar streams and special educational needs provision, which children can move through during their school life. Some children develop at different stages. They could stay on the same site, but move around. I have seen some examples of that on a smaller scale, and I think it has potential.

I also think, and Ministers will not be surprised by this, that when we award free school status, we must make sure we get the consultation right. There is an issue at the moment in that the schools provisionally

awarded then carry out the consultation. We had a case in my constituency where a school was the only bidder at the time—a long time ago, before others came forward—and it decided to go against what the community, the elected representatives and the local authority wanted. It carried out its own consultation and, frankly, picked or cherry-picked which bits it wanted, and the regional schools commissioner was useless in trying to do anything about it. Our local community feels slighted by that, and we just hope that that will be reflected on and improved in the future.

I recognise that the two Ministers representing us today are fully over their briefs, thoughtful and, crucially, willing to engage. Both are parents, and I thought it was a bit of a bizarre comment earlier to say that not enough parents were speaking; I think probably most of us are parents. We have a four-week-old child who has been sleepless for a week, and I can confirm that I am definitely a parent on the back of that.

Turning to nurseries, I pay tribute to the Minister for children and families—the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince)—who in his then new role came to visit Councillor Jo Morris, a director of a number of nurseries in my constituency, where he took the time to engage thoroughly with the challenges. Again, to be helpful, I have some asks, but I first wish, along with many other speakers, to pay tribute to the fantastic nurseries and the staff who, throughout covid, were able to keep the show on the road. It sometimes felt that they were the last ones standing, and as parents we were very grateful for what they were able to do.

My first ask is about the peculiar position whereby schools offering nursery provision do not pay business rates, yet traditional nurseries do so, although most of us would recognise that they are educational establishments. The nursery that the Minister visited pays £15,000 a year. It has about 100 children, so that equates to about £150 per child. In his supremely effective lobbying of the Chancellor, will the Minister please add that one to the list?

On the broader funding point, we all support the annual increases in the national living wage above inflation, but we must also recognise that nurseries, which predominantly rely on the free provision funded by the Government, have limited abilities to increase income, and that has to be taken into account. I know there are discussions and consultations about ratios, and there are other options such as qualified ratios, underpinned by strict conditions linked to Ofsted inspections. This is a particular challenge of recruitment, and when recruitment is a challenge at short notice, nurseries rely on agencies with very expensive costs, which impacts on their viability.

I welcome the Government's investment in speech and language development and the catch-up post-covid, but could consideration be given to allowing nurseries also to bid for some of that money, on a case-by-case basis? Without having the expertise of fellow hon. Members and friends who were teachers in a former life, I suspect that doing some of that in nursery would make a significant difference. Again, it was highlighted to us post-covid that there was a direct impact on the speech of a generation of young children entering nurseries.

Finally, hon. Members will find no bigger fan than me of school holiday after-school provisions and the holiday activity fund, which I have pushed for in debates

over years. Indeed, I brought Mark Draycott of Draycott Sports Camp to Parliament to meet the Secretary of State for Education, who was then in a former role in that Department. The holiday activity fund is a huge welcome relief for busy working parents—nothing fills busy parents with dread more than the thought of a long summer holiday and entertaining their children—and I want the Government to turbocharge it. We can do more with sharing best practice, because the scheme is still in its infancy, and that will help build capacity to provide greater local choice.

I also want the Government to consider one of my long-standing asks about the free use of school community and sports facilities for any community parent group that is putting on constructive activities for young children. That will predominantly be sport, but it could also be scouts, guides or other activities. It seems a bit bizarre that we ask volunteers to step forward, and then charge them for the privilege.

Finally, as we consider the cost of living, it would make a big difference if we followed the German model of spreading out term times region by region, so that we dampen down peak demand for school holidays, as that would save hard-working parents considerable amounts of money.

5.37 pm

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): We have heard lots of Members saying how important children are, and I think we genuinely feel that across the Chamber, but how sparsely populated is the Chamber for this important debate? This is not the first time, as the Minister will recall from the last debate, that I have commented on how sparsely populated a debate is, particularly on the Government Benches. I am really disappointed. *[Interruption.]* The Conservative party has 350 MPs. Sadly, the Liberal Democrats has only 13, so proportionately there are far fewer. I am really disappointed that more people are not in the Chamber for this important debate.

**Jacob Young** (Redcar) (Con): Will the hon. Lady look to her left and tell us how many Lib Dem MPs are in the Chamber with her today?

**Munira Wilson:** If the hon. Gentleman is good at maths, perhaps he could work out that one out of 13 is a far higher percentage than whatever it is—six—out of 350.

With children and young people having disproportionately suffered the impact of pandemic restrictions, and the Government having scrimped and saved on supporting their recovery, millions of children across the country are bearing the brunt of the cost of living crisis that we face. They cannot be let down again, which is why I tabled an amendment to the motion about the provision of free school meals. It is utterly shocking that in one of the richest countries in the world, in April this year more than 2.6 million children were living in households that had experienced food insecurity in the past month, according to a YouGov poll commissioned by the Food Foundation. That was an increase of over 5% in the three months between January and April 2022. No child in the United Kingdom should be going hungry, let alone 2.6 million of them. That is why, given the cost of living crisis that we face, the Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to extend free school meals

to all children in primary education and to all those secondary school children whose families are in receipt of universal credit.

I am proud that the Liberal Democrats in government delivered universal free school meals for every child between the age of four and seven regardless of income. All the evidence shows that hunger has a severe negative impact on children's mental health, with studies linking it to increased anxiety and stress in primary children—and we know that is off the charts at the moment. It was bad before the pandemic, and it is even worse now. International studies have also demonstrated the need for well-balanced meals, which many families are simply unable to afford, to ensure strong brain development. It is important for children's wellbeing and for their learning, yet we know that increasingly cash-strapped families are struggling to put food on the table. The policy outlined in the amendment would give a much-needed boost to families who are really struggling to put food on the table every day and ensure that every single primary child and all disadvantaged pupils in secondary education get at least one decent, healthy, hot meal a day.

There are also the social benefits of children coming together and eating the same meals together at the same time without, say, parents opting out at the primary level—it is a really important social intervention as well as academically and for their wellbeing—but there are already reports that some school meal caterers are talking about cutting portion sizes to cover the costs of free school meals. As I pointed out to the Chancellor a couple of weeks ago—needless to say, he did not address my point and he did not seem to take much interest in how children are going hungry and will get hungrier—the Tory Government have increased funding by a measly 4p over the past seven years since universal infant free school meals were introduced by the Liberal Democrats in government in 2014. So, yes, that is 4p in those years, and food prices have risen by almost 6% in the last year alone, so is it any wonder that we are hearing about caterers having potentially to cut school meal portions?

My concern is that for schools already struggling to make ends meet with spiralling energy bills, insufficient catch-up funding, rising children's mental health needs and food price inflation, we will see cuts to teaching assistants and other staff, and less money spent on books, computers and other essentials. That is especially true of schools in rural areas, which are disproportionately underfunded. Councillors in the south-west of England regularly point out to me the inequality of school funding in their region.

I urge the Minister to look at this area and ensure that children from lower-income backgrounds do not suffer academically and in their wellbeing because they are going hungry during the cost of living crisis. Will the Government please consider expanding the remit of free school meals beyond infants to the many other children who are struggling with hunger daily? Every child deserves to grow up happy and healthy regardless of their background.

I want to touch on childcare costs. I cannot better the speech by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), and the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) also made some important points. Here in the UK, we have the highest childcare costs in the world. We know that parents up and down the country are struggling to pay their childcare fees, and

[*Munira Wilson*]

the crippling costs mean that many are unable to return to work. Earlier this year, *Pregnant Then Screwed*, which has been mentioned several times, did a survey of 27,000 parents and found that two thirds are paying more for their childcare than for their rent or mortgage. That is simply unsustainable for many households. That has resulted in 43% of mothers stating that they are considering leaving their job, and two in five said that they are working fewer hours than they want because of childcare costs. Some 80% of families who responded to the survey expect their childcare costs to increase in the next six months. That worry is backed up by research undertaken by the children's charity, Coram.

The Government are trying to address the issue by looking at tweaking the ratios. Quite apart from all the safety issues thrown up by reducing the number of staff to children, if the Government think that the savings will be passed on by childcare providers to parents, they are living in another world. I have a three-year-old son and am absolutely delighted that I will not have to keep paying childcare costs after September, when he starts school. I pay for 27 hours of childcare a week. When he turned three, I thought, "Happy days! Apparently, I get 30 hours of free childcare, so I don't have to pay for it anymore." No: I am still paying at least half the bill I was paying before he turned three.

As many others have pointed out, the funding the Government give for those so-called free hours does not begin to cover childcare providers' costs, particularly in London and particularly given that they are rising. It is a complete red herring when Ministers say, "We're going to tweak the ratios and that will help to save money and provide more childcare." Childcare providers cannot afford to pass that on.

I am in the fortunate position of being able to afford to still pay the £500 a month, as opposed to the £1,000 a month I was paying before, for 27 hours of childcare. Many families simply cannot afford that. I am also in the fortunate position of having an amazing husband who will stay at home and look after my son for two days a week; many families are simply not in that position. I urge the Government to address this issue head on and, instead of tinkering with ratios, look at offering a fair deal for parents in terms of quality childcare provision to give children the best start in life.

I could not possibly sit down, Madam Deputy Speaker, without saying a couple of words about children's and young people's mental health. Many in this Chamber will know that I have been banging on about that since the day I got elected two and a half years ago. We hear time and again from Ministers about how much they are doing to support children's mental health, given the spiralling numbers. I give credit to the Government: they have put money into this area. The problem is that we are not necessarily seeing the impact on the ground. That is why I was so disappointed in the last Session when Conservative Members talked out my private Member's Bill on presenting an annual report to Parliament on children's mental health.

We have a fragmented system. We have some mental health support provision—we need far more at an early stage in the community and in schools—and then we have the NHS provision. The data is not joined up. It is sparse and patchy: we do not see what it translates to

per head at a local level and we do not see granular detail of what some of the waiting times are for treatment at a local level. If we want to measure the impact of what the Government are doing and what we need to bridge the gap when children need to be suicidal before they get mental health support, we must measure and track far, far better the provision being put in place for our children.

5.47 pm

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is important, when debating this issue, to avoid the risk we often run in this House of getting into an auction on spending figures. I very much commend Ministers for having focused not just on the totals of funding allocated, but on the policies designed to ensure, as is incredibly important at a time of rising living costs, that that money is going as far as possible.

I must, in my introduction, perhaps challenge a little the comments of the hon. Member for Twickenham (*Munira Wilson*). I certainly remember being in the room with *David Laws*—then Education Minister, and someone for whom I have a good deal of respect—when the free schools policy, of which my son is now a beneficiary at his primary school, was implemented under a Conservative-led coalition Government. It is important that we all recognise that there is good will on all sides towards achieving the outcomes we seek.

The figure for local authority expenditure in the most recent year for which it is available, the financial year to 2021, is £41.5 billion. That does not include local authority expenditure on children's services that take place through academy schools. So, £41.5 billion is being spent on children's services and maintained schools, and two thirds of that is on the education budget. And £41.5 billion is a lot in anybody's money, so clearly it is right that the focus should be on how we spend that money best. We are sometimes at risk of talking about how the funding in the system is at the highest ever level, but the numbers of children in the system are also at an exceptionally high level. For most of our children, the numbers in the system drive expenditure rather than other areas of priority.

When we look at how things have been developing and where the Government are going, we see a welcome focus on not just totals, but outcomes. What is the money actually doing for the children we are seeking to spend it on? Opposition Members often talk about the *Sure Start* programme, on which more than £500 million was spent in the financial year that I referred to. However, one of the long-standing frustrations with *Sure Start* among people who spent time as an elected member in a local authority, as I did, was that the restrictions on it inhibited the benefits that it could deliver. The decision to shift that investment towards family hubs—to change the way in which that money was spent—is welcome, because it sees children in the context of their family and household and enables what we do for them to be greater for a given level of expenditure.

I will touch on a number of different aspects of the way that the money flows around the system, which is extremely important in considering how we best address the issues at the heart of this debate. When we look at what has been going on in the system with the money, it is important to recognise that according to those DFE



figures—I reiterate that they apply only to local authority-maintained schools; the picture with academies is similar but covered by separate figures—we have seen an increase in the revenue balances held by schools, from £275 million to £379 million. The levels of deficits in maintained schools have gone down from £150 million to £128 million. The average balance held by maintained schools has risen to £160,000.

Those figures tell us that the system is extremely well resourced at the level of individual schools. That means that headteachers and school governors have the resources to deploy in the way that they know best, knowing the children and families that attend their setting. Interestingly, the figures also show that the only area of the system where there has not been an increase in the balances held is nursery settings. We need to recognise that a challenge remains in ensuring that the aspiration expressed for the national funding formula is reflected in the experience of those settings.

There has sometimes been a tendency to hide behind the fact that the money is allocated through local authority schools forums, but the reality is that the challenges that Members on both sides of the Chamber have outlined exist today. Much as I welcome the tax-free childcare policy for working families, which has been an enormous benefit to working households across the country—I should say that I am personally a beneficiary—we need to recognise that the Government are right to begin to look at such things as childcare ratios, because we must think about how the money that we are putting into the system can deliver the greatest service and the best possible outcomes for the children at which it is targeted.

The benefits of early education are often overlooked. We tend to talk about early education very much in the context of enabling parents to go to work, rather than what it does for children. The Early Intervention Foundation—a charity of which I was a trustee and which continues to do excellent work, funded by the Department, among others—highlighted that we can tell pretty accurately what a child's key stage 5 results will be from their outcomes in the early years foundation stage. It is clear in the first years of life how a child's progress—measured across the various outcome measures that that stage uses—will be reflected in their progress throughout life. That is a clear demonstration that what we do in the earliest years makes the biggest possible difference. I very much welcome the increased focus that seems to be coming from the Department on ensuring that that money is again spent in the best possible way.

It seems clear that all across the system, whether in nurseries or in schools, it is money allocated at local discretion that brings the best results for children. The feedback that I have had from headteachers across my constituency, where we are fortunate that almost all schools are either good or mostly outstanding, is that resources to enable catch-up at school level have added the most value.

The tutoring programme, ambitious and welcome though it was, has been less significant in transforming children's outcomes than the school using resources in a way that reflects its local knowledge of the child and their family. The same is true of local authorities: they have seen a significant increase in expenditure, as we would expect in a system under pressure with more and more children, but it is with a level of local discretion, as outlined the Government's approach, that we deliver the best possible outcomes.

Children with special educational needs and disabilities, who I know have been very much the focus of Ministers' recent thinking, have often been most at risk in the context of the covid pandemic. They are at the heart of the recovery that we are talking about. They are also often the children who find it most difficult to access the childcare that they need, because small commercial and independent providers in particular struggle to recruit, train and retain staff who have the skills to provide specialist support where it is required. The role that local authorities will continue to play, including as convenors of multi-academy trusts under the Schools Bill, demonstrates that the Department for Education and its Ministers are listening. They recognise the challenges and see where things need to go.

I will finish where I started: £41.5 billion in local authority expenditure on children's services and maintained schools, plus the expenditure on academy schools, is a lot of money by anybody's way of counting. It seems to me that we must step back from the attempt at an auction of promises and focus on doing what Conservatives in government do best: making sure that we deliver value for money and outcomes for our children.

5.56 pm

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): When we look at which developed countries have the highest cost of childcare, the UK always comes close to the top of the list. We know that parents are feeling it, as we have heard today. The Petitions Committee, which I chair, has debated the issue at some length in response to calls for an independent review of childcare funding. As the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) said, we should not have an auction of promises. This should not be a party political issue; it needs to be properly looked at in the round.

The comments that we received from petitioners were quite depressing, but sadly not surprising. One response to our survey said:

“My wages will just about cover our childcare costs, therefore I am basically working only to ‘hold my place’ until my baby is old enough not to need childcare i.e. once she starts school.”

Another commented:

“I do not have the option to have family or friends look after my child when I return to work and I can't afford to not be in work, but childcare costs more than my mortgage for full time hours.”

We all know that the spiralling cost of childcare is a worry for many parents amid the cost of living crisis, but the impact on new mothers is particularly troubling. Decisions that women make in that very short period have a huge effect on their earnings for the rest of their life. That has a direct impact on the gender pay gap, or what many might call the child pay gap.

The International Labour Office has found that in the UK, the pay gap between mothers with two children and non-mothers is 25% across their lifetime. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that by the time a woman's first child is 12 years old, her hourly pay rate is 33% behind a man's. That is appalling, but we can hardly be shocked when our childcare system is not only one of the most expensive in the world, but assumes that most families do not need any help with childcare costs until their child reaches the age of three. Support is poorly targeted, and it is letting families down.

[Catherine McKinnell]

Unfortunately, there are worrying signs that some problems for new mothers are getting worse. *The Times* recently reported that in the past few months, the trend of women staying in work has stalled, so we are now seeing an increase in new mums dropping out of the workplace, many of them for good. Furthermore, about 29% of women who are not working say that it is because they need to look after their families, compared with about 7% of men. The figure has risen by 5% in the past year alone. It is the first sustained increase in 30 years, and it is incredibly troubling. Some of this may be due to covid and changes in lifestyle patterns, but the increase is most pronounced among women aged between 25 and 34. It feels as though the clock is ticking backwards for women.

Women may make the decision not to work for various reasons. It is their right to make that choice, and the choice should be supported. But what about those for whom it is not a choice—those who simply cannot afford the childcare, and who give up their jobs as a result? What about the women who work three jobs and barely get to see their children, because that is the only way they can put food on the table once they have paid for their childcare costs? The cost of a part-time nursery place for a child under two has risen by a staggering 59% since 2010, which is totally out of sync with the changes in general prices and average earnings.

There is so much evidence to show that the Government's own policies are driving up childcare prices. The free hours are of course extremely welcome to those who receive them once their child turns three, but in providing funding at a level that they know is inadequate, the Government are forcing providers to cross-subsidise by making non-funded hours even more expensive. This is robbing Peter to pay Paul, and it is mothers who are losing out as a result.

We need a childcare system that not only helps to make the lives of parents and their children better, but helps to make our economy work. We cannot stand by while it becomes too expensive for mothers to work, so that women are forced back into the home for the sake of those few precious years, out of sheer economic necessity. Early years childcare and support is as essential for parents to get to work as the roads and the rail network, and it provides a great many benefits beyond that. Until we approach it as the vital infrastructure that it clearly is, we will continue, as a country, to let down women, families, and our whole economy.

6.2 pm

**Mark Logan** (Bolton North East) (Con): You will be glad to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I intend to keep my remarks short.

Let me begin by thanking all those working in childcare support in Bolton and across the country, following what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). I especially thank all the staff at Eagley School House Nursery in Bromley Cross, run by Julie Robinson, who, when it comes to this issue, is a leader not only in my constituency but throughout the United Kingdom. I also thank those at Queensbrook Children's Nursery in Halliwell and Bolton School in Chorley New Road, which I visited very recently. When visiting those nurseries, especially during the pandemic,

I have often heard from staff who feel that they have not been loved enough by the general public—among others—although they are providing an exceptional service, and I want to put on record my gratitude for the support that they have given my constituents.

What, then, are the Government doing? Conservative Members, including the Minister, have mentioned quite a few things today, including the offer of free childcare to every three and four-year-old, giving millions of children the best possible start in life, which has had a positive impact on more than 1.21 million children. The Government have also provided free childcare so that more than 124,000 two-year-olds, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can receive a good early education. They have cut the cost of childcare for 458,000 children through our tax-free childcare offer. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) mentioned the £14 million that we have already committed to family hubs, in addition to the £20 million to support the 10 new ones.

In the last few days, I have been reading through the Action for Children report, which makes incredibly interesting reading. I notice that my next-door neighbour, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), is in the Chamber today. When the Government continue to focus on the levelling-up agenda, Bolton will be one of the top 10 local authorities to benefit from such an agenda, and the investment through public services will help to bring over 8,000 children out of poverty and give them better life chances.

Just to finish, I would like to say happy birthday to my daughter Brannagh, who is in the Public Gallery and who turns four today. She is dressed like a little princess, and a princess she is, of course. She was not very happy this morning when I sang "Happy Birthday" at 8 am, but everyone here will be happy to know that we are banned from singing "Happy Birthday" in the Chamber. And with that, I shall finish.

6.5 pm

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan). That was a lovely story about his daughter, and I wish her a happy birthday. I hope the whole family enjoys a wonderful day out in central London.

It is also an absolute pleasure to speak today in this important debate and I hope that we will have further opportunities to debate education, which is such a central issue for our country. I would like to speak in support of the motion, but before I start I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the education professionals in the country, including teachers, support staff and people working in colleges, higher education and the childcare sector, as well as those, like some in my own family, who work in delivering apprenticeships.

I am keen to focus on a few key points because I realise that time is pressing. The first is the fundamental importance for any country of investing in education. The second is the scale of the issues we face following the pandemic. Some of these have been addressed by other colleagues, but I would like to address them a little further. The third is the need for the Government to raise their sense of ambition in this important area, and the fourth is the need for a much more robust and deliverable strategy.

First, turning to the overall importance of education, it is great to see cross-party agreement on this important and central area of Government work. In my opinion, it is an absolute first-order necessity for any Government, in any country in the world, to invest in the future of their people. While it is acknowledged across the House that that is fundamental, I believe we need to think quite deeply about what that actually means, based on our own experience in this country and on international comparisons, because some of it is a little bit challenging for some of our colleagues.

The evidence base from around the world and from recent British history shows clearly that investment over time ultimately means better-paid teachers—whether people are in favour of that or not, the evidence shows that to be the case—and it also means investing in resources such as better school buildings and better labs for teaching science, as well as better provision of other forms of resource to help teaching, whether that is technology or other forms of resource such as school trips or school sports. These things all add up. Unfortunately, they are all expensive, but they are investments and they should be seen not as short-term costs to the public but as a long-term investment in our future as a country, in our economy, in our people and in our aspirations as a society.

We can see this in some of the achievements in recent times. Programmes such as the London Challenge are an example. At one point, London schools were seen by many commentators as being in a really difficult place, but determined investment, with central Government funding the resources, working in close partnership with schools, teachers, parents and local communities, drove up standards in London despite all the challenges. There are numerous other examples. Some time ago, we saw the literacy and numeracy strategy introduced by David Blunkett when he was the new Secretary of State for Education.

The investment in science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—subjects is another example. The way that STEM has been championed and the growing number of young people studying A-levels in maths, science and technology is a national success that predates the current Government. It is something we should all be proud of, and it should be seen as a long-term investment in this country's future. It should not be a party political issue, but we should be honest about the resources needed. These examples are seen in jurisdictions around the world—in US states, in individual cities and in European and Asian countries—where exactly the same process is under way. Governments are determined to invest in education because they believe in their country's children and their country's future.

Sadly we have faced the most awful setback to those aspirations because of the pandemic, and it is worth reflecting on how awful it was. It has been wonderful, a real pleasure, to see people out in the streets again over the past few days, yet things were so different only a few months ago. These are anecdotes, but I still find it hard to think back to the Zoom meetings in which parents had to scurry off to offer a rudimentary education to their children, with the support of online resources. We should remember the difficulties experienced by young people who had to sit public exams for the first time. That is the scale of the challenge we face. It is not an insignificant challenge, and we should not underestimate how difficult it is for our schools and universities.

We need a focused strategy that is up to the scale of the challenge. Kevan Collins is a respected educationist who worked with the Government and their Liberal Democrat and Conservative predecessors for years when he was at the Education Endowment Foundation. He has a very strong academic background and is respected across the education profession, but a year ago, sadly, the only thing he was able to do was resign, because he felt so strongly about the lack of resources targeted at the problem I have described. I hope there is all-party appreciation of what it means for a senior public servant to take such action. I am sure he would have loved not to resign. He wanted to lead programmes to improve the quality of education in this country, but he was left with no choice.

We need a proper strategy, and we need to think about why Kevan Collins left. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), is a committed chap, and I hope he will look at this again. The Government need to think about the strategy, invest significant amounts of money—far more than currently planned—and focus on what actually works. My hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) clearly illustrated the principles that should be considered but sadly are not.

To make matters worse, it is appalling when we contrast and compare the Government's spending on education with their spending on other things, such as the poor-quality spending on PPE, which was often not procured effectively or in line with Government procurement rules, or the Chancellor's recent failure to focus money where it is most needed to fully address to cost of living crisis. He gave handouts to people with second homes, which I am sure they welcome but is not an effective use of public money.

I would like Ministers to look at this again and to think carefully about what a good strategy might look like. I would argue that a good strategy has the appropriate funding, is school-led and is built on best practice. We have heard a lot of talk about best practice, but international success is based on best practice. There is widespread agreement and consensus on what that might be.

We also need to work with parents. We have heard about the importance of breakfast clubs, early years education and other forms of support—the success of the education maintenance allowance has been mentioned—in providing practical support to families who are currently squeezed. There is emerging evidence on things like targeted funding, continuing professional development for teachers, small-group tutoring and oracy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) mentioned. All of this should be in the Government's strategy, but sadly it is not.

I appreciate time is at a premium, so I will sum up. It has been a pleasure to speak today, and it is wonderful that we are debating such an important issue. I hope the House will find more time for debate, and I hope the Government will address this issue and offer education greater priority in their thinking. Education seems to be a big gap in Government policy at the moment. It is almost as if education has been forgotten, but it is vital and should be the first duty of any Government.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I hope Members will now confine themselves to about six minutes. I am quite sure you can all do the arithmetic,

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

and it is important that we have time for the Minister and the shadow Minister to reply to the debate.

6.14 pm

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): Every day, tens of thousands of working parents across the country are being failed by inadequate childcare policies that leave families financially crippled, stagnating in their careers and desperate for radical change. Families are being let down by Ministers, who are simply not doing enough. Indeed, in June 2021 the Government's own education recovery adviser, Sir Kevan Collins, resigned in protest at the Government's failure to support children's recovery.

The average price of a full-time nursery place for a one-year-old child is a staggering £14,000, and one in three parents spend more than a third of their entire income on childcare. More often than not, it is families on the lowest incomes or on universal credit, single parents and those with disabilities who suffer the most.

Labour's Sure Start scheme aimed to help people and was very successful. It supported working families with childcare. Naturally, the Conservative coalition cut its funding by two thirds, despite the policy's success. One in three parents with a household income of less than £20,000 have had to cut back on essential food or housing as a direct result of childcare costs. A staggering 92% of parents said that the cost of childcare had affected their standard of living because the cost was completely unaffordable and had resulted in a substantial impact on them.

It is not as if the nurseries and childcare workers themselves are the ones benefiting from this. Research by the National Day Nurseries Association found that 95% of nurseries in England did not even have enough funding to cover their basic costs after the impact of the covid pandemic on their incomes. Now, in the midst of a cost of living crisis, nursery finances will be squeezed even more by the rise in national insurance and the cost of heating and electricity bills. Nurseries such as Grosvenor nursery in my constituency are fighting for survival because of serious funding shortages caused by the disparity between funding and overhead and staffing costs, not to mention the large deficit created by the pandemic. In a recent visit last year, I saw at first hand the hard work that its staff and management do in nurturing our future generations. This crisis is only going to get worse as more and more childcare providers go out of business, increasing demand for places and pushing prices even higher for families struggling with the rising cost of living.

Until recently, Government underfunding was one of the main reasons nurseries were going out of business, but now we are seeing more nurseries unable to open because of a recruitment crisis, with demoralised staff leaving the profession in droves. Part of the reason for that of course is that wages for early years staff are embarrassingly low. May I remind the Minister that these are people we trust and hand our children over to, to look after? Many of them are on the national living wage, which is not enough for them to survive on, bearing in mind the work that they are doing. Nursery workers do not just play with our children; they are preparing them for school, and helping in their development and with their educational opportunities.

The first 1,000 days of any child's life are crucial to their development and their life chances. People working in early years care are crucial to this and should be paid fairly as a result. That is even more important for disadvantaged children. Being in early education is one of the most important things that can help to close the gap for them. Lower-income parents will be forced to withdraw their children, who have the most to gain from not being a year behind their peers when they start school.

Childcare has not only been neglected; it has been deliberately starved of funding, and has forced parents—many mothers—out of work and into poverty. Labour would introduce breakfast clubs, and support children in sporting and social activities to broaden their horizons. We would give children access to a counsellor to support their mental health and we would introduce an education recovery premium to prevent children from falling behind.

I remind the House that Nelson Mandela once famously said:

“The true character of a society is revealed in how it treats its children.”

I have to say that the Government's neglect of childcare is pushing us deeply into this. Finally, I would like to wish Brannagh Logan a happy birthday, bearing in mind that she is the daughter of my constituency neighbour.

6.18 pm

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I join in wishing Brannagh a happy birthday—I hope she has a lovely day.

I wish to start by talking about the points I made in my intervention on the importance of oracy. The Government talk an awful lot about the importance of being evidence-led. The evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation is conclusive on the importance of oracy. It is a shame that the Minister for School Standards is not here right now, because I was slightly concerned that in his response he seemed to be talking about oracy in relation just to the early years, whereas good oracy education needs to be continued throughout the early years, all the way through primary school and on into secondary school.

Through the all-party parliamentary group on oracy, I was recently able to invite some wonderful year 6 pupils from Cubitt Town Junior School in Tower Hamlets to show off their oracy skills. They were absolutely outstanding. Their confidence, the way they spoke to the different adults in the room and the way they articulated everything they had gone through was incredibly impressive. It was even more impressive given the fact that they were children from one of the most deprived areas in the country. Many of the pupils at the school are pupil premium children and some of them have English as an additional language. Despite all the barriers, they have overcome them through sustained and explicit oracy teaching.

It is not just me or the Education Endowment Foundation saying this: Ofsted is saying it as well. In its report on its English review, published on 23 May, Ofsted talks about the importance of oracy—in fact, a whole section is dedicated to it. It says that

“a strong command of the spoken word is a crucial outcome of English education. The benefits of spoken language extend beyond just success at school. Becoming an articulate, effective communicator forms the basis of democratic engagement within wider society.”

Ofsted goes on to say:

“Opportunities for pupils to develop their proficiency in spoken language require explicit teaching”.

I really wanted the Minister for School Standards to hear that point about explicit teaching. Too many people think that skills in oracy are developed through osmosis by just being in an environment. We are talking about explicit teaching. According to Ofsted, those opportunities “require explicit teaching of the knowledge, for example vocabulary, and ideas necessary for effective communication. These opportunities should be planned carefully, both in English lessons and across other subjects.”

So we are talking about the explicit teaching of oracy. In my opinion, and that of the APPG, oracy teaching should be as explicit as the teaching of reading and writing. Reading, writing and oracy are the three pillars that should underpin all English education.

My hon. Friends have already made for me the points in my speech about how expensive childcare is, so the House will be pleased to hear that I am not going to repeat them all now, but it is worth pointing out that net childcare payments in the UK account for 29% of average income. That is clearly unsustainable and cannot be allowed to continue. Why is the cost so shockingly high? Is it because wages are too low? Is it because childcare costs are too high? It is probably a mix of both.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) made an excellent point about the number of women who are—I hate the phrase—economically inactive because they are unable to go out to work because of the cost of childcare. I recently shared something to do with the cost of childcare on my social media and there were nearly 200 comments under it. I would like to share with the Minister a couple of the points that were made.

One commenter gave the childcare provider's point of view. They said:

“If the government wants it to work they have to increase the amount that childcare providers get. Currently that is a national lottery. Some providers get most of the funding rate, some providers get about half, as their”—

local authority—

“keeps a large proportion. There are early years providers all over the country closing their doors as they just can't make it work. Even those that are committee run, not-for-profit and that just take funded 3 and 4 year olds still can't make it work.”

On top of that there's a massive staffing crisis in early years. Settings are shutting left, right and centre. Many providers, including me, are having to reduce the age range and numbers we care for because we can't attract qualified staff. There's a massive national shortage. We would love to pay our fabulous staff more but the funding rates are just too low.”

The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) made a thoughtful speech. The only point on which I disagree with him is about the childcare ratio. I used to work in children's nurseries before I trained as a teacher: believe me, if someone has more than two or three two-year-olds, they have their hands full. We should think seriously about the ratio. It is also worth thinking about how things work in a nursery when we look at the ratio of adults to children, because often one of the adults might be doing nappies, another might be feeding and another might be playing with the children, so the ratio can be higher during the time the adult is physically with the number of children, because it is to do with the number of adults and children in the building. I warn against trying to change that as a way to reduce costs.

I want to conclude by quoting what a constituent told me about her difficulty paying for childcare. She said

“I work full-time with a 2-year-old and a 5-year-old. I'm an early years teacher, so see the struggles of many parents with regard to childcare. My 2-year-old is in nursery for ONLY 3 mornings and this costs us around £400 each month. My 5-year-old is in school, but we have to pay breakfast club and after-school club fees. This is another £150 plus per term. Myself and my partner work full-time, and keeping up with payments is a massive struggle. We rely heavily on my mum who is in her 60s and also works, which is a huge strain on her. I think working parents need more support for children under 3.”

I completely agree with my constituent. I do hope that the Government will not put pride in front of accepting Labour's plan for education recovery and the free breakfast and after-school clubs that would make a great difference to many working families.

6.25 pm

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The title of today's debate is “Children's education recovery”, but it should actually be “The economy's recovery” because we know that investment in education is the key to productivity gain. We also know that, with the unemployment rate at 3.8%, the crisis in skills and the crisis that so many employers are facing, if we could solve the childcare problem, we will go a long way towards helping out in many of our workplaces.

One crisis that the Government have been dealing with in “backlog” Britain in the past week has been what is going on in our airports. How many of those airport jobs were done by women who now cannot be in those jobs because of the childcare crisis and the cost of it?

We know that, in March, two leading organisations for women, Pregnant Then Screwed and Mumsnet, conducted big surveys into the impact of childcare costs. My hon. Friends the Members for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) have mentioned the impact of expensive childcare. We know that 62% of parents say that the cost of childcare is the same or more than their rent or mortgage. In a high-value area such as Hornsey and Wood Green, this can be prohibitive in terms of returning to work. We know that the figure is even higher for black and Asian families, at 71%, and 73% of parents who work full-time say that the cost of childcare is the same or more than their rent or mortgage. Ninety-nine per cent. of respondents said that childcare costs are making the cost of living crisis even more challenging. Forty-three per cent. of mothers say that the cost of childcare has made them consider leaving their job and 7% have quit altogether. How is it possible that it is cheaper for mums to stay at home than to work?

We know that work is a key driver for general wellbeing—or it can be in a high-quality work environment. We know that it is the Governments around the globe who are child friendly and in favour of more women in the workplace who end up having more productive and innovative workplaces, so it is a real driver for the economy.

We know from the same survey that has been mentioned a number of times in this debate that 76% of women who do not have children have said that childcare costs are a major factor in why they have not started a family.

[Catherine West]

This goes to the heart of Government and planning in that we do want to encourage families to have children. We will end up having lower and lower fertility rates, which will have a knock-on effect on the economy in the long term.

We know that childcare pays for itself. The Canadian Government found that, for every \$1 they invested in childcare, there was a return of \$1.50 to \$2.80. They described it as the hat trick of jobs and growth and subsidising childcare in the whole of Canada. It would be worth while if the Government looked at that example.

However, instead of investment in childcare, we see in the UK today a big sticking plaster, hoping the problem will go away. What assessment has been made of the approach under the taxation model? That is simply not being taken up to the degree that it needs to be. It seems to be a bit of a gimmick which only a very small number of women are taking up.

A constituent wrote to me to say that the policy is “bad for staff, bad for children’s mental health, safety and general wellbeing.”

She has asked me personally to push the Government not to

“risk the lives, happiness and education of our children”

by getting the childcare approach wrong.

The Government appear to have no plan, no ambition and no vision for our children or the long-term future for our families. For years, they have been turning a blind eye to this crisis and, in the meantime, generations of young people are being utterly failed. We are living in a low-growth economy. The Government need to wake up to the role that investing in education will play to increase that productivity. Affordable childcare could enable women to go back to work, knowing that their children are receiving the best start in life. The Government should stop tweaking those ratios; it will put even more parents off using childcare if they think it will not be a good start in life for their children.

We know that a decent early years education has a major impact on child development. Education is one of the most powerful means of overcoming disadvantage. Even the Duchess of Cambridge has said this:

“What we experience in the early years, from conception to the age of five, shapes the developing brain, which is why positive physical, emotional and cognitive development during this period is so crucial.”

That is my contribution to the jubilee celebrations. We know that a properly invested-in childcare sector is good for parents and crucial for our children’s recovery after the pandemic.

6.30 pm

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): Children have suffered throughout the pandemic in so many ways. Many have lost loved ones, and all of them have been through the same stresses and tensions as the adult population. Research published by the Education Endowment Foundation found:

“For many children the experience of lockdown was made harder by cramped living conditions, no access to green spaces, parental mental health difficulties and financial hardship.”

Young people have had to deal with restrictions on their lives and on their opportunities to develop social skills.

The lack of opportunities for social interaction has meant that the children of the pandemic have had a very different start in life from what would usually be the case. They have missed out on the fun of making friends, playing together and growing together. Those are important experiences for children, so it comes as no surprise that recent research by Parentkind found that mental health and wellbeing is now a major priority for nearly nine in 10 parents. We must ensure that education policy and the way schools operate support that priority. We must put children’s happiness and wellbeing at the forefront of all decision making about the education children receive.

Of course, a child is far more likely to do well if they are enjoying their learning. I recently visited Woodchurch Church of England primary school in my constituency, one of just six primary schools in the country to have been selected to take part in the “Life-Changing Libraries” initiative being run by BookTrust, which aims to develop a culture of reading for pleasure. BookTrust has provided funds that have been used to transform a space in a corridor into a magical reading environment, stocked with a specially curated book list of approximately 1,000 titles chosen by BookTrust’s expert team.

Talking to the staff, it is absolutely clear that the project is a real success. It is noticeable that there is so much enthusiasm for reading in the school, with children reading in the playground at break times and sharing books with each other. I ask the Minister to look at that scheme and beyond just the phonics that the Minister for School Standards’ opening speech focused on. Encouraging a love of reading in childhood reaps so many rewards, improving reading levels while engaging in the world beyond the immediate here and now. Every child should be given that opportunity. There is absolutely no need to test reading for pleasure; one just needs to create the environment for it and encourage an appetite for it.

That brings me on to the issue of testing. If we are serious about putting children’s wellbeing at the centre of their educational experience, it is time we took a long hard look at just how much we are testing them. There are numerous stories of parents worried sick that their children are being over-tested, and recent polling by Parentkind found that 80% of parents disagree that SATs provide parents with useful information about their child’s achievement or progress in school.

The National Education Union has reported that pressure on teachers and children from cramming for SATs

“is extreme and school staff have very little time to deliver interesting, varied lessons, as they feel forced to ‘teach to the test’”.

Will the Government scrap SATs and put pupils’ wellbeing at the forefront of education policy?

There needs to be a proper look at the curriculum too, to ensure that all children have the opportunity to develop their creativity and are given the opportunity to study and engage in subjects such as art, music, drama and dance—I note the comments by the Minister for School Standards earlier. The OECD’s programme for international student assessment, known as PISA, measures 15-year-olds’ ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges. The OECD is introducing a creative thinking assessment to PISA in 2022 as an optional additional assessment. It is immensely disappointing that England has opted out of that, and I ask the Minister to explain why.

There are other things that the Government should be doing to improve children's experience of education. They should reinstate the £20 uplift to universal credit, because we all know that children who are hungry struggle to learn, and that it is no good for children's wellbeing when their parents are struggling to pay the bills. Ministers should get behind the "Right to Food" campaign of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and end the scandal of hunger and foodbanks once and for all. The Government should also get rid of the two-child limit in universal credit that punishes families with more than two children. The Government have responsibility for the wellbeing of every child. They should give every child access to qualified in-school counselling staff, as Labour would do, to provide psychological support for children when and where they need it.

If we are to look after our children, we need to look after their teachers too. The Government cannot be getting it right when, as National Education Union research has shown, two thirds of teachers in state-funded schools in England feel stressed at least 60% of the time and over half of teachers say that their workload is either "unmanageable" or "unmanageable most of the time". Education policy has to be about the wider social environment in which children are growing up. If we have a Conservative Government who are determined to destroy public services, as we do at the moment, then our children will suffer and their futures will suffer too.

The massive cuts inflicted on Wirral Council by central Government since 2010 have left the future of numerous libraries in my constituency hanging in the balance. A loss of libraries and of skilled librarians does a huge disservice to the children of our country. Those cuts, too, have put the future of Woodchurch leisure centre and swimming pool at risk. How are the children supposed to learn to swim if they do not have a leisure centre because of these cuts from central Government? The impact of cuts to public services on our communities cannot be overestimated. The Government are creating cultural deserts and opportunity deserts, and children will suffer as a result.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call shadow Minister Stephen Morgan.

6.35 pm

**Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab):** As children return from half-term to continue with exams and the cost of living crisis spirals, this debate speaks to the heart of concerns across this House and up and down the country.

I echo the tributes paid to the dedicated and committed staff in the education sector by Members in all parts of the House. We have heard in interventions and speeches specific mentions of individual staff, schools and other settings. The hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) paid particular tribute to nursery staff. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) recognised the efforts of teaching staff in schools and colleges. From school leaders to teaching assistants, catering staff to each and every teacher, I place on record our thanks to them all. They have stepped up for our children time and again, during the pandemic and since. Millions of those children will now be sitting exams and assessments for the first time since 2019. It is

a credit to our young people that they are rising to this challenge after the unprecedented challenges they have faced: we are so proud of them all. But this Government have consistently let them down. Ministers' miserable failure to help children to recover lost learning threatens to limit their opportunities.

We have heard that, again, in interventions and speeches today. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East spoke of investment in after-school clubs—something that Labour's recovery plan would invest in—and partnerships such as the London Challenge under the previous Labour Government, which drove up outcomes for young people. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) made powerful points on oracy. I thank her for her work on the all-party parliamentary group on oracy in encouraging speaking skills at the heart of an education catch-up in schools. She also talked about the value of breakfast and after-school clubs.

As parents increasingly feel the pinch, this Government's inaction is pricing families out of care for their children. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and other Members rightly praised the valuable work of Pregnant Then Screwed in lobbying for women and mothers. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) spoke of the raw deal on childcare that parents are getting from this Government and the importance of speaking up for parents. I thank her for so passionately doing so.

My hon. Friends the Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) made powerful speeches about how the costs of childcare in the UK compare with European countries, and the cost that that has for our country's economic output. That is why Labour's motion calls on Ministers to match our ambitious plan to help children to recover lost learning and keep childcare costs down. Despite the challenges that they face, parents are working to provide the very best for their children. Time and again this Conservative Government have made that task harder. While Ministers dither, Labour has proposed practical solutions to help children and families to thrive. It is time that this Government matched that ambition.

After the unprecedented disruption of the past two years, children must be at the centre of our plans for the future. We need a real education recovery from the pandemic that supports both children and teachers—not a gimmicky quick fix, but a recovery that is targeted, impactful and sustained, that is embedded in the fabric of day-to-day school and that is properly resourced, but there has been a complete absence of both leadership and ambition from this Government. Sir Kevan Collins's plan was rejected out of hand by a Chancellor who told us that he had maxxed out on support for our children. It is now just over a year to the day since Sir Kevan resigned. At the time, he said that the Government's plans were "too narrow" and "too small", and would be delivered "too slowly." His warnings have proved to be spot on.

The Government's flagship national tutoring programme has failed children and it has failed taxpayers. The latest figures suggest that the Prime Minister's blustering target of 1 million hours of tutoring will not be met until all children currently at secondary school have left.

[Stephen Morgan]

Worse still, Ministers plan to pull out the rug from under schools that are working hard to deliver the scheme. Tapering funding will mean that schools will cover 90% of the cost within three years. With eye-watering energy bills and food and other day-to-day costs rising, there is a real possibility that schools will struggle to deliver the scheme. It is children in the classroom who will suffer.

As schools face the pinch, so too do families. Childcare is critical for learning and development, but it is also intrinsically linked to our wider economic prosperity. Pre-pandemic, children on free school meals arrived at school almost five months behind their peers. Spiralling costs will make that worse. The average cost of a full-time nursery place for a child under two has risen by almost £1,500 over five years. In fact, the United Kingdom has one of the highest childcare costs as a proportion of average income, as we heard earlier. At 29%, we are 19% higher than the OECD average. That has perpetuated a gross inequality that is holding women back. Some 1.7 million are prevented from taking on more hours of paid work because of childcare costs and we lose £28.2 billion in economic output every year as a result. That contributes to the farcical situation in which young families' income will be higher if they remain on universal credit than if they were both in work and paid for childcare. Of course, that is more punitive for single parents.

The Education Secretary likes to say that he is evidence-based and evidence-led, although there has been some debate about that recently, but what more does he need to see before acting? The latest bright idea, to cut the number of adults looking after groups of children, will likely reduce the quality of provision and have no impact on availability or affordability. After yesterday's no confidence vote, I know that Ministers will be particularly concerned with numbers, but parents and children will tell them that this just does not add up.

In contrast, Labour's children's recovery plan means small-group tutoring for all who need it, breakfast clubs and activities for every child, quality mental health support for children in every school, professional development for teachers and targeted extra investment for those young people who struggled the most with lockdown. That is the action that we would take right now, and it includes investing in childcare places for young people on free school meals. Because we know that childcare pressures do not stop when children start school, we are investing in before and after-school clubs for children.

Every day, this Government are wasting time that children and families do not have. Yet there was nothing in the White Paper to combat that and nothing in the Schools Bill. This Government are happy to let children drift, with teachers and parents picking up the pieces time and time again. It is not inevitable that a generation of children should be held back by disruption to learning and spiralling costs. It is political choice made by this Government. Just as the previous Labour Government transformed education, we would do so again, working together with staff, parents and children. Labour would deliver a sustainable recovery for children's education for more than a year, and we would insulate children and families from the Government's cost of living crisis.

The choice for Ministers and the question for Back Benchers is once again clear. Will they finally admit that they have got it wrong and back our plans, or will they leave children as an afterthought once again? If they do not stand up for children and families, Labour will.

6.44 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince):** I welcome the opportunity to respond on behalf of Her Majesty's Government and I thank the many hon. Members who have made constructive and passionate contributions to the debate. I will try to respond to as many of the themes and issues raised as possible in the time available to me; there is much to respond to and so little time in which to do it.

As the Minister for School Standards said at the beginning of the debate, we are committed to making childcare more affordable and accessible, supporting parents and providing children with the best possible start in life. Recovery remains a priority for the Government. It is a key part of building back better, levelling up and making sure that we are ready and skilled for a future in which the next generation can prosper.

Opposition days are, by their nature, political and the Opposition are right—dare I say it—to push us to go further and faster, which is their job after all. I gently say to them, however, that there is not one Member of the House who does not want every child in this country to have a world-class education where they are given every opportunity to fulfil their potential. I have two young children and I want them and every single child in our country to have better life chances than we had, regardless of their background or where they live.

We all want more accessible, flexible and affordable childcare and early years education, with every child having the best possible start in life. We all want every single school to take a whole-school approach to mental wellbeing and to ensuring that the children and young people get the mental health support that they need when they need it.

I turn to hon. Members' contributions, starting with early years and childcare, which have been raised the most. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan) in rightly thanking all those working in education, early years and childcare. I agree that the early years are often not recognised as much as they should be, which must change. Early years are very much educators and they improve life chances, so let me say from the Dispatch Box: "Thank you." I cannot let the moment go without saying happy birthday to his daughter Brannagh—I thought it was Princess Elsa of Arendelle up in the Gallery, but I will "Let It Go".

On early years, the hon. Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) raised the issue of childcare costs. They are passionate campaigners and advocates for change in this area, in which we need change. They are right to point out that there were challenges pre-pandemic that were exacerbated by the pandemic, and that we have to fix our childcare sector and market. They are right to focus on under-twos where the cost is often highest and on school holiday provision, which are certainly priorities for me.

I am certainly aware of the impact on women in particular, because we know that childcare costs fall disproportionately on women, which comes with family



planning decisions; disproportionate costs and salary disparities; and women deciding not to work. That is an issue for business, because we are losing a huge talent pool across our country, not to mention the impact on our economy.

The hon. Member for Walthamstow was also right to mention paternity leave. I will certainly look into the stigma issue that she raised and I will raise flexible working with colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I do not recognise her figures in relation to nursery and early years funding, which I will come on to in a moment. Let us not forget that, for under-twos and for three and four-year-olds, there is tax-free childcare and up to 85% of the cost is available for those on universal credit.

The hon. Lady was right to pay tribute to the campaigning group Pregnant Then Screwed. I have met with its representatives, I have heard what they have to say and I look forward to continuing to work with them. I cannot say that I agree with them on every single issue, but they raise some good points and there is no question but that change is required in this area.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden raised academies, and I agree that academies are excellent. She also said that work is the best route out of poverty, and I totally agree. I am sure that she welcomes the reality that far fewer children—in fact, hundreds of thousands fewer—are growing up in workless households. She was also right to focus on childcare. I understand that she is working cross-party to look closely at childcare costs more generally. I look forward to that committee's recommendations.

The cost of breakfast and after-school clubs was raised, which is an important factor. The hon. Lady also raised Sure Start, but I have to say that that was not early years education. It did not often provide childcare, and when it did, it was private sector, but I may come on to Sure Start later.

**Catherine McKinnell:** May I make a suggestion to the Minister? There is a significant lack of uptake of so-called tax-free childcare. I say “so-called” tax-free childcare because it is not tax-free; it meets 20% of the cost up to a certain threshold. It could be that, in the desire to create the impression of cutting taxes, the Government have failed to explain to parents what the system actually is, and it may be that, in naming it for political purposes, it has lost its practical application. Perhaps the Government should look at giving a more honest label to the scheme.

**Will Quince:** I may not agree on that particular point, but where I do agree with the hon. Lady is that the take-up of tax-free childcare is far too low. I am looking very closely at that and at what more we can do as a Government to promote it. I would certainly encourage all Members from across the House to promote our childcare offer more generally, of which tax-free childcare is only one part.

More broadly on the point about childcare, I will say this: I have two young children, and I get it. They have both been through nurseries and childminders, and I understand the costs. I know that many parents up and down our country are paying as much, if not more, than their rent or their mortgage on childcare costs. We are very much committed to ensuring that all families get the support they need when they need it.

We are already supporting families and investing to support the cost of childcare. We are offering free childcare to every three and four-year-old—that is the 15 and then the 30-hour offer. We are providing free childcare to disadvantaged two-year-olds—that is the 15-hour offer. We are cutting the cost of childcare for working parents through our tax-free childcare offer, which I have just mentioned to the hon. Lady, and of course paying up to 85% of the childcare costs for those on universal credit, supporting the families who need it most. In total, that comes at a cost of £5.1 billion.

**Stella Creasy:** Obviously, “Frozen II” has many lessons that we all need to follow, but one is not just to “Let It Go” but to be truthful to yourself, so can the Minister clarify this? He said he did not agree with the figures I cited from the National Day Nurseries Association, which has been looking at the impact of the subsidy, but he has just said how much money it costs.

Obviously, many parents would say to him that 15 hours' or indeed 30 hours' free childcare is not the childcare they need in order to maintain their jobs. Is he saying that the Government believe that the money they are currently providing fully covers the cost of childcare? If he does not think there is a £2,000 differential between the cost of childcare for a three-year-old and what the Government are paying, what does he think the gap is?

**Will Quince:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I will come on in just one moment to exactly the funding we are putting into childcare. However, in total, it is £5.1 billion. On the free entitlements alone—the entitlements the hon. Lady references—it is £3.5 billion.

I know that there is more we need to do, and that is why I am working across Government to take a renewed look at the childcare system, finding ways to improve the cost and availability of childcare and early education for families across England. We do have some of the very best early years provision in the world, and I will continue to be hugely ambitious for working parents, ensuring flexibility and reducing the cost of childcare wherever we can.

A number of hon. Members across the Chamber during this debate have raised international comparators, which are of course important. So far, I have visited the Netherlands, and I will be visiting Sweden and France. I hope to visit more because it is very important that we take an evidence-based approach to this issue and look at the international comparators. *[Interruption.]* On day trips, I hasten to add, on the Eurostar—these are certainly not jollies. We are very much looking at the evidence and ensuring that we get it right. It is a hugely complex issue.

**Catherine West:** The Minister is very generous in taking interventions. Could I press him on the point that he is doing some case studies and doing some visits? That is all very helpful, but 12 years have gone by, and this is a crisis, an emergency, and we need to get women back into jobs because the economy is crying out for more workers. Provided that there is a high-quality work environment, I think we all support people getting back into the workforce, but they are saying they cannot afford it. There are the other costs such as the energy bills, the rent or the mortgage: if we add childcare to those, they just cannot make the sums add up.

**Will Quince:** Of course that is an important point, but let us not forget that this is the Government who introduced the 30 free hours and the offer of 15 hours for disadvantaged two-year-olds, so we do take this issue incredibly seriously. We do understand that parents are struggling now, and I am genuinely looking at what I can do with our spending review settlement to support parents with childcare at the moment.

It is also important that we take a step back and look at the broader issue in the round. The countries that the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) rightly referenced in her speech have taken many years to get to their position. They have taken an evidence-based approach, looking at the economic situation in their own countries, and particularly at female participation in the labour market and the difference that makes to the tax yield. I know that we will do the same. *[Interruption.]* As I said, we spend £3.5 billion, and we have done every year over the past three years on our early education entitlements. In the most recent spending review, we committed to an extra £160 million in 2022-23, another £180 million the year after, and £170 million the year after that, compared with the 2021-22 financial year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) is, of course, a passionate advocate for his great city, and he referenced the holiday activities and food programme, and family hubs. I had the fortune to visit one of the holiday activities and food programmes, organised by Port Vale football club and Adam and Carol. They are doing amazing work, offering enriching activities, healthy nutritious meals, and nutritional education to students across the city, and I very much thank them for that.

We will continue our investment in the holiday activities and food programme throughout the spending review period, so an additional £200 million per year over the next three years will ensure that those programmes continue to go from strength to strength. Stoke-on-Trent has been a successful beneficiary of family hubs, which represent a £500 million investment nationally. I very much look forward to the results and contribution that the great city of Stoke-on-Trent will make, because I know it has a huge ambition of going much further, and above and beyond the expectations of the family hub model in terms of the one-stop shop it can deliver.

There is no greater champion for Swindon than my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), and he is a strong advocate for parents within his constituency. I welcome the addition to his family just a handful of weeks ago. He rightly referenced the importance of provision for special educational needs and disabilities, and I would expect nothing less from a former disabilities Minister. He is right about the importance of units within mainstream schools, and that that will be very much at the heart of the SEN review. As part of the spending review we secured an additional £2.6 billion of capital funding, £1.4 billion of which will be allocated for the next academic year. That will ensure that we build not just special school places, but those places within mainstream settings that are so important.

I was fortunate enough to go on a number of visits to nurseries with my hon. Friend, and I thank him for his words about early years staff and the role they play. I also thank Councillor Jo Morris for kindly showing me some of the challenges. My hon. Friend rightly raised

the issue of business rates, which I will look at with the Chancellor. I must, however, correct him on one point, because schools pay business rates, but the issue is settled by the Department for Education.

To allay my hon. Friend's concerns about ratios, I should say that we are consulting only on one extra child, and moving to the Scottish model, which has operated in Scotland for some time, but safety and quality are at the heart of everything we do. Finally, he mentioned the holiday activities and food programme and Draycott Sports Camp. It was a most fantastic visit, and I hope that the three-year funding settlement provides certainty that that funding will continue, and allows providers to be more innovative.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) rightly referred to free school meals and food insecurity. This Government have extended eligibility for free school meals several times, and to more groups of children than any other over the past half century. It would carry a hugely significant financial cost if we were to increase the income threshold, and it is right that provision is aimed at supporting the most disadvantaged, and those who are out of work or on the lowest incomes. I will, of course, continue to keep free school meal eligibility under review, to ensure that the meals support those who need them the most.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) speaks with great authority on this subject, given his experience. We always take an evidence based approach, and we focus not just on money in, but on outcomes and on what we are aiming to achieve. He was right to reference Sure Start. We are shifting to family hubs. I am not one to hugely criticise Sure Start, but there are a number of differences in the approach. He was right to focus on nurseries and maintained nursery schools, and that is an area I am looking closely at.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) rightly raised oracy. We are making significant investment in early years, but I and the Minister for School Standards would be happy to meet her and the APPG.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to today's important debate. The Government are determined to create an education system that offers opportunity to everyone, no matter their circumstances or where they live. That is why we are leading the way and have announced a wider programme of ambitious reforms to truly level up outcomes and ensure that we build back better from the pandemic.

**Sir Alan Campbell** (Tynemouth) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

*Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.*

*Question agreed to.*

*Main Question accordingly put.*

*Question agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House notes it is a year since the resignation of the Education Recovery Commissioner Sir Kevan Collins; condemns the Government's continued failure in that time to deliver an ambitious plan for children's recovery, including supporting their mental health and wellbeing; is concerned that the inadequate attention being paid to childcare, both for the youngest children

and around the school day, is allowing the attainment gap to widen and costs to soar for parents at a time when there is significant pressure on household finances; and calls on the Government to match Labour's ambitious plan for children's recovery, including measures to keep childcare costs down for parents while the cost of living crisis continues.

## Business without Debate

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** With the leave of the House, I will put motions 2, 3 and 4 together.

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

#### MEDICINES

That the draft Pharmacy (Preparation and Dispensing Errors - Hospital and Other Pharmacy Services) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 28 April in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

#### MEDICINES

That the draft Pharmacy (Responsible Pharmacists, Superintendent Pharmacists etc.) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 28 April in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

#### SANCTIONS

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 9) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 477), a copy of which was laid before this House on 27 April in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Alan Mak.*)

*Question agreed to.*

## Great British Railways Headquarters: Stockton Bid

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

7 pm

**Matt Vickers** (Stockton South) (Con): I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to have the debate this evening. I have the huge honour of representing Stockton South: a place to be proud of with a great past and an even greater future ahead of it. Stockton has been the home to many great people and many great ideas, from Harold Macmillan to Brass Crosby and from the invention of the friction match to the creation of the world's first public passenger railway. Two centuries ago, the House adopted two separate Acts to enable the creation of the Stockton to Darlington railway. I am now asking the House to support me in my mission to bring the headquarters of Great British Railways to Stockton.

For me, there are several classic, immutable pairings of things that are existentially tied together: cream and jam; Batman and Robin; Britain and democracy; the Prime Minister and Peppa Pig; and, far more importantly, Stockton and the railways, which is the most quintessential pairing of them all. Stockton could not have played a more central role in the history of the railways. The first discussions about the potential creation of that very first passenger railway were had in Stockton town hall. The first track of that railway line was laid in Stockton, and the first ticket was sold to a passenger in Stockton.

It is all too easy to forget how important a role railways have had in our history and developing our international economic might. It is even easier to forget where they came from and how proud Stockton should be of playing its role therein. Sadly, this achievement has never been celebrated in Stockton as fully as it should have been, but I am delighted that, as we prepare to mark the bicentenary of this incredible innovation, we are righting that wrong. The amazing Friends of the Stockton and Darlington Railway, who are determined to treasure our heritage, are working to ensure that we celebrate this momentous occasion. The national lottery, local authorities and the Government are all supporting plans to mark the occasion, and even private enterprise is playing its part.

They say that the best ideas are the ones that you come up with in the pub. Well, my friend Jim, the landlord of the Locomotion pub, has done just that. For any railway enthusiasts out there, Locomotion is a must: it has a collection of memorabilia that rivals the National Railway Museum. Jim came up with the idea of a run along the route of the original line that has gone down a storm and raised huge amounts of money for local good causes. I am particularly delighted that, thanks to the Government's levelling-up fund, we are working on plans to create a permanent tribute to our railway heritage at Preston Park, where the original track ran. Plans may include a miniature steam railway. If the Minister is kind enough to grant Stockton's wish today, I would be delighted to take her for a ride on said steam train.

Railways are in Stockton's DNA, and even the king of railways himself, Michael Portillo, is backing the bid to make Stockton the home of Great British Railways. The chief chino-wearing, track-touring fab controller said:

[*Matt Vickers*]

“You couldn’t have a more iconic place for a railway’s headquarters than Stockton, it’s simply a name that resonates through the history of railways”.

I understand Thomas the Tank and even the Fat Controller himself may also be endorsing Stockton’s bid.

Aside from our fantastic railway heritage and the incredible endorsements received by our bid, there are many other reasons why the Great British Railways headquarters should come to Stockton. We are connected up and getting more so by the day. Much-awaited improvements to the local road network are taking place on the A66 and the A19. Local train stations in Eaglescliffe, Billingham, Middlesbrough and Darlington are benefiting from a multimillion-pound overhaul. We recently got our first direct train from Thornaby to London. Our new cycle lane network will stretch across my constituency to provide a healthier means of transport and hopefully reduce congestion. And thanks to the work of our amazing Tees Valley Mayor, our airport has been reborn. Moreover, the most amazing, enthusiastic, talented, hard-working and skilled people live in Teesside, and Great British Railways would be very lucky to employ them.

Important to my case is the fact that the Government have a commitment to levelling up. For me, levelling up is not about moving jobs from one big city to another, or from one place to another super campus; it is about spreading opportunities the length and breadth of the country. The placing of Great British Railways in Stockton would complement the many other great things going on in my part of the world. Teesside is on the up: our airport is reborn; we are leading the green energy revolution; and we are home to some of the brightest and best entrepreneurs. The new Treasury campus is allowing people from my area to get top-level civil service jobs and we are home to the UK’s first and biggest freeport, creating 18,000 jobs. As we prepare to mark 200 years since the first passenger railway rolled along the track in Stockton, will the Department for Transport bring the railway home to where it all began and—choo, choo!—choose Stockton as the home for Great British Railways?

7.6 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** Well, if there is ever a pub quiz on the subject of Stockton, I feel very equipped to take part after that. I am sure Stockton can look forward to an extremely vibrant visitor economy after that wonderful rendition of all the many reasons to visit Stockton. Before I respond to the various points he made, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (*Matt Vickers*) for securing the debate.

It is wonderful that so many Members across the House have debated the Great British Railways headquarters. We have had previous debates on the merits of Swindon, Derby, Crewe, York and Carnforth. My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (*Peter Gibson*), who is also in his place, has also been a superb advocate. It is really wonderful and fantastic to see such support for our railways, and to see Members up and down the country engaging in this important conversation about the future of our railways and doing outstanding work supporting bids for their towns and cities. The Government understand the importance of the rail industry and the incredible rail heritage across this

country, something my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South set out so well. One thing we can be really sure of is that wherever the headquarters is ultimately located, it will be in a very deserving place.

As my hon. Friend set out, Stockton has a proud and storied rail heritage, as has County Durham. We are all aware of the famous Stockton and Darlington Railway, the world’s first public railway to run steam locomotives. Indeed, when, in September 1825, George Stephenson manned the Locomotion No. 1, it was for the Stockton and Darlington Railway, so how appropriate to have my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton South and for Darlington in their rightful place, sitting side by side in this very Chamber. Heralding the beginning of a new era of transportation in this country, County Durham is truly deserving of the name, “Cradle of the Railways”. A place as steeped in the history of the railways in this country, and, indeed, the world, as Stockton and County Durham is will always have an important part to play.

The inbox of the rail Minister—my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (*Wendy Morton*)—provides great evidence of the fact that the innovation that started in Stockton spread rapidly across the country. Many other towns and cities have played an important part in our proud railway heritage and hon. Members are equally proud to represent them. The response to the competition has been incredibly positive. I am pleased to say that, by the time the competition had closed on 16 March, we had received 42 applications.

Hon. Members will be well aware that the Williams-Shapps plan for rail, which was published in May 2021, set out the path towards a truly passenger-focused railway, underpinned by new contracts that prioritised punctual and reliable services, the rapid delivery of a ticketing revolution, with new flexible and convenient tickets, and a modern and accessible network that meets the future needs of its customers.

Central to the Williams-Shapps plan for rail is the establishment of a new rail body, Great British Railways, which will provide a single familiar brand and strong unified leadership across the rail network. Great British Railways will be responsible for delivering better value and flexible fares and the punctual and reliable services that passengers absolutely deserve, bringing ownership of the infrastructure, fares, timetables and planning of the network under one roof. It will bring today’s fragmented railways under a single point of operational accountability, ensuring that the focus is on delivering for passengers and freight customers. Great British Railways will be a new organisation with a commercial mindset and a strong customer focus. It will have a different culture from the current infrastructure owner, Network Rail, and a very different incentive from the beginning.

Great British Railways will have responsibility for the whole railway system, with a modest national headquarters, as well as several regional headquarters. The national headquarters will be based outside London, with regional Great British Railways headquarters across Great Britain, bringing the railway closer to the people and communities it serves and ensuring that skilled jobs and economic benefits are focused beyond the capital, in line with the Government’s commitment to levelling up as well as with the priorities of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South.

The competition for the headquarters was launched by the Secretary of State on 5 February 2022 and closed for applications on 16 March. The Great British Railways

transition team has analysed the 42 submissions that we received from towns and cities across Great Britain against a set of six criteria for the national headquarters. Those include an alignment to levelling-up objectives, and my hon. Friend has articulated the benefits of that. It must be connected and easy to get to, with opportunities for Great British Railways to thrive. The railway heritage and links to the network are also critical, as are value for money and public support. I commend my hon. Friend's work in nudging, persuading, enthusing and influencing his constituents to support his bid for the Great British Railways headquarters to be in Stockton. I am particularly delighted to learn about the enthusiasm of Jim from the Locomotion pub—that really is superb.

The Great British Railways transition team will recommend a shortlist of the most suitable locations that will go forward to a consultative public vote, and Ministers will make a final decision on the headquarters' locations based on all the information gathered. As I mentioned, we are so pleased by the number of high-quality bids received, and I am sure that, wherever is chosen, the future headquarters will go to somewhere truly deserving. We will soon announce a shortlist of locations that will go forward to an online consultative vote and will receive ministerial visits. The Secretary of State will make a final decision later this year, considering all elements of the process.

Alongside a new national headquarters, Great British Railways will have regional headquarters responsible and accountable for the railway in local areas, ensuring that decisions about the railway are brought closer to the passengers and communities that they serve. Cities and regions in England will be able to have greater influence over local ticketing, services and stations through new partnerships between regional divisions and local and regional government. Initial conversations are starting with local stakeholders on how those partnerships can best work together.

The reforms proposed in the Williams-Shapps plan for rail will transform the railways for the better, strengthening and securing them for the next generation.

They will make the sector more accountable to taxpayers and to the Government. They will provide a bold new offer to passengers and freight customers: punctual and reliable services, simpler tickets and a modern, clean, green, innovative railway that meets the needs of the nation.

While transformation on that scale cannot happen overnight, the Government and the sector are committed to ensuring that the benefits for passengers and freight customers are brought forward as quickly as possible. We have already sold more than 250,000 of our new national flexi season tickets, offering commuters savings as they return to the railways. To help passengers facing rising costs of living, our great British rail sale offered up to 50% off more than a million tickets on journeys across Britain, saving passengers £7 million. I have every confidence that many of those passengers will now be heading to Stockton, or possibly between Stockton and Darlington, for a fantastic experience of the railway—and maybe to the Locomotion pub to learn more about railway heritage.

The transition from emergency recovery measures agreements to a new national rail contract is very much under way. We are providing more flexible contracts that incentivise operators to deliver for passengers. Great British Railways will be an organisation that works alongside the local communities that it serves.

The Government and the Great British Railways transition team welcome interest and advocacy for cities and towns. We welcome participation in the competition for the Great British Railways headquarters, so that together we can deliver the change that is absolutely required. We look forward to building this new vision for Britain's railway in collaboration with the sector and communities. The Great British Railways headquarters is one of many steps that we are taking to achieve that.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.17 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 June 2022

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

## Statutory Gambling Levy

9.30 am

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered proposals for a statutory gambling levy.

Today, we will consider the introduction of a statutory gambling levy to replace the inadequate voluntary model, and it is a pleasure to do so under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I draw the House's attention to the fact that at the back of the room we have bereaved families of people who gave their lives up to gambling addiction. I thought it only fair to highlight that at the start.

As we all know, the gambling review was launched over 18 months ago, and most of us thought that by now we would be discussing the detail of the White Paper in the Chamber, but unfortunately, that is not the case. I am hoping that good things come to those who wait. With just a couple of weeks to go until the highly anticipated publication of the long overdue Government reform of our gambling legislation, I am pleased by the shift in direction towards reform that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has signalled. Press reports over the past few weeks of the Government's plan to introduce limits to online stakes and to pioneer an affordability system to prevent people from gambling beyond their means are welcome indeed.

Stake limits online should be comparable to those for land-based venues, and to be effective, any system of affordability must be run independently of the industry and have a single customer view. This is not the time to take half measures, and only banning front-of-shirt sponsorship without tackling the dozens of other ways in which gambling firms advertise would represent a missed opportunity. That would not address the harm that advertising can lead to, nor would it reduce children's exposure to advertising as they watch sport on their screens.

Given that the previous gambling legislation review took place well over 15 years ago, the White Paper needs to make meaningful, robust and significant proposals. However, we are here today to discuss a specific proposal that I believe is vital to the success of the gambling review and which must be at the centre of the Government's plan: a statutory levy on gambling operators to provide long-term funding for research, education and, most importantly, treatment of gambling-related harm.

Gambling is leading to significant harm in this country, and more than 55,000 children aged between 11 and 16 are gambling addicts. The gambling industry spends more than £1.5 billion a year on advertising, and 60% of its profits come from the 5% who are already problem gamblers or at risk of becoming so. On average, one problem gambler commits suicide every single day, and we have families here today who have experienced such loss.

Funding for research, education and treatment with respect to gambling-related harm in the UK is facilitated through a system of voluntary contributions from gambling operators, which should be 0.1% of their gross gambling yield. That goes to GambleAware, and each year, at current levels, that equates to donations totalling around £10 million. From there, funding is allocated by GambleAware to a range of third-sector organisations, academic institutions and two NHS providers. That might sound like a sensible amount of money and a seemingly sensible system, but if we consider the scale of the cost of gambling harm and how poorly the voluntary levy is operated, it soon becomes clear why this is a woefully inadequate method of providing funding for research, education and treatment.

Because of the voluntary nature of the contributions, operators can vary the size of donation that they send to GambleAware, which means there is a lack of consistency in the amount donated each year. Operators even have discretion over how much they contribute, with some operators giving as little as a few pounds. Alongside that ridiculous situation, operators are able to decide when donations are made. As a result, there is a complete lack of stability in the voluntary funding model. Recipients cannot plan budgets effectively, or ensure that long-term research projects or education programmes are properly funded, when they have no idea whether there will be enough money to continue them.

To make things worse, operators are able to determine who their contribution goes to, meaning that the voluntary system allows the gambling industry to retain a sense of control over the funding. That damages the independence of the service providers, academic institutions and other third-party recipients of funding, as well as the effectiveness of the levy in reducing wider gambling harms in the UK.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Carolyn Harris:** I will make some progress, because I have a long speech and a lot of people want to speak.

Earlier this year, NHS clinicians announced that they would stop taking money from the gambling industry to treat people with addiction. While I agree with the sentiment, I worry that that will only hurt treatment services in the long run. We need to find a better long-term solution to allow the NHS to access funding that comes from the industry but is not controlled by it.

The all-party parliamentary group for gambling related harm and Peers for Gambling Reform have recognised and commented on the limitations and failings of the current voluntary system. That view is shared elsewhere. Back in March, Lord Foster of Bath, chair of Peers for Gambling Reform, received a reply to a letter, from Andrew Rhodes, chief executive of the Gambling Commission. In his reply, Mr Rhodes stated that

“the current voluntary system does not provide long-term certainty of funding to support planning and commissioning, it does not impact on all operators fairly, and it is perceived as allowing gambling operators too much control over the availability and destination of funds.”

**Craig Whittaker** (Calder Valley) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Carolyn Harris:** I am not giving way. Even GambleAware, the charity that receives voluntary donations, commented recently on the woefully inadequate nature of the voluntary levy. Its chief executive, Zoë Osmond, said in April that the industry has never reached its target of achieving 0.1% of GGY—gross gambling yield—from the voluntary industry levy. The vast majority of the industry continues to donate in support of research, education and treatment at extremely low levels.

**John Spellar:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. She referred to expenditure being tied to donors, but the industry puts billions into the Treasury through taxation, so should that not be properly done through the national health service? Also, will she say what she actually wants for the industry? Does she want to close down gambling, or does she acknowledge that millions of people enjoy gambling perfectly safely and that abuse is going down?

**Carolyn Harris:** If my right hon. Friend listened to the rest of my speech, he might hear some information about where that is not the case. As for me being anti-gambling, I am certainly not. I spent last Thursday night at Ffos Las racecourse having a thoroughly good time placing bets on horses.

Clearly, the voluntary levy is not fit for purpose. It lacks consistency, transparency and, crucially, accountability. So, what is the solution?

**Craig Whittaker:** What the hon. Lady is trying to achieve is admirable, and she will find that she has a lot more support than she realises. My big concern, which I expressed in the previous debate on this subject as well, is the black market—the offline, unregulated areas. Black market gambling is growing at a huge pace, including, believe it or not, over WhatsApp, which is highly encrypted and hard to tackle. If we are to have a levy, how does she propose that we tackle this area? I fear that it will, sadly, push people into the black market.

**Carolyn Harris:** I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the comments of Peers for Gambling Reform and the Gambling Commission about the industry's expression of concern about the black market being extremely over-exaggerated.

**Craig Whittaker:** That is such a scary comment to make. I point the hon. Lady to the report "The State of Illegal Betting" produced by the Asian Racing Federation, which includes Australia, Japan and Hong Kong among its 17 members. It states that 61% of online gambling is unregulated, illegal and on the black market. Would she like to refute that evidence?

**Carolyn Harris:** I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention, again, to the Gambling Commission's own words that the scare around the black market has been grossly overestimated. That is from the Gambling Commission, not from me.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I was involved in the campaign to regulate the payday lending industry. Does my hon. Friend recognise that in order to protect its profits, the sector's big argument was, "Don't touch us, because the threat is the black market"?

**Carolyn Harris:** I agree entirely, and I will talk about exactly that later. It is clear to see that the voluntary levy is not fit for purpose. What is the solution? Well, a solution is already in place and available: it is set out in the Gambling Act 2005. There are already provisions in legislation for the Government to place the collection of levy donations on a statutory footing should the voluntary arrangement be shown not to work, which clearly it does not. DCMS should use existing powers to require operators to pay an annual levy to the Gambling Commission. A joint advisory levy board should then be given oversight of the levy paid. That would be a formal cross-Government working group led by the Department of Health and Social Care. The levy board should oversee a comprehensive assessment of the evidence base of gambling-related harm and the limitations of the current voluntary system.

It is also crucial that the levy is graduated or smart. By that I mean that when considering the options for calculating the statutory levy, officials have devised a formula that requires companies offering potentially more harmful gambling products to pay a correspondingly higher proportion of the levy—more simply known as a "polluter pays" principle. This has precedent in New Zealand, where the gambling problem levy is set by an Order in Council and reviewed every three years. A lottery provider, bingo hall or high street bookie or casino will pay far less than a giant monopolised online gambling operator. There is also precedent in the UK: the Financial Conduct Authority already operates a similar system for financial services organisations, where a statutory levy is imposed on firms to fund free-to-client debt advice according to the "polluter pays" principle.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): The problem with having a statutory levy is that it would hit land-based gambling companies—casinos, bingo halls and the high street shops—when they are just emerging from the pandemic. I appreciate that the hon. Lady suggested they would be levied at a slightly different rate, but the problem is that if those businesses go out of business, we could see a huge cost to the Exchequer from loss of taxation revenue, lost jobs in communities and an economic hit on the high street. Does she not consider that to be a likely outcome of a statutory levy?

**Carolyn Harris:** I certainly do, but I just stated that the statutory levy would be graduated so that land-based high street bookies, on-street casinos and bingo halls would not pay the same levy as online companies who make a lot more profit than the individual companies, who will also have overheads of staffing costs and business rates. I acknowledge all that, but the proposal is aimed at making sure that the polluters pay the most.

If it was brought in by the DCMS, a 1% levy on industry revenue would provide £130 million of funding for research, education and treatment. That would massively improve the disparity between other nations' spending and that of the UK. Australia spends £368 per gambler, Canada spends £329 per gambler and New Zealand spends £413 per gambler. The UK spends £19 per gambler. If we had funding for research, what could we do? We would finally be able to hold a proper prevalence survey, not wholly inadequate telephone surveys of a few hundred people, to ascertain exactly how many people in the UK are suffering gambling-related harm, so that we can get them the help they need. There would



be improvements in research and data for clinical outcomes, along with the quality of data collection, to ascertain how gambling treatment clinics are performing and what more could be done to improve treatments.

With better and more certain funding for education, we can prevent people falling into the hands of gambling operators in the first place. We can highlight ways to set up banking blocks, deposit limiters, advice services and many more tools, not only to teach people about the dangers of some gambling products, but to signpost those who are already addicted towards help.

Finally, and probably most importantly, we come to treatment. Treatment for gambling addiction in the UK is completely inadequate. Chronic underinvestment in the gambling treatment system, as a result of the current voluntary levy, has led to a scenario in which treatment is unregulated, unaccountable and fails to use the evidence base in its strategies. Only between 2% and 3% of people with gambling problems enter the treatment system, all of whom are self-referrals. With a statutory levy, that can change.

It is clear that the statutory levy is vital to the success of the gambling review, but the industry would disagree. It would say that the largest companies have donated £100 million already, with more to follow, and it would label as anti-gambling those of us who call for this levy. I would call the industry anti-reform. That £100 million is well under what would have been collected by a statutory levy, and there is no continuity or certainty in that funding. Clinicians, the Gambling Commission and GambleAware all say that current funding levels are insufficient.

The industry claims that the introduction of a flat-rate levy would be unfair to some land-based sectors, such as casinos, bingo and high street bookies, because those sectors might contribute to less harm but would be disproportionately affected by a levy as a result of the potential impact on jobs. That is a deliberate misinterpretation of the position. The whole point of a levy is that the less harm that is caused, the less need there is to pay for the consequences of that harm. If some sectors harm less than others, it makes perfect sense for them to pay less. That is what is meant by a smart levy, based on the “polluter pays” principle.

**Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con):** I should refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. As the hon. Lady knows, because we have spoken about this, I do not particularly disagree with her about the principle. The one thing that does worry me is that she and some of her colleagues might never be satisfied with the rate at which the statutory levy is set. If it was set at 1%, they might say it should be 2%; if it was 2%, they might say it should be 3%; if it was 3%, they might say it should be 4%. We would have a never-ending arms race.

Because I do not disagree with the principle, could the hon. Lady give me some reassurance that she would support a fixed, unamendable figure for a statutory levy, for example 1%, with a lower rate for land-based sales—I agree with her about that—to prevent the arms race I am worried about?

**Carolyn Harris:** I find myself in the position of matriarch of the anti-gambling brigade, which I am not. I have no interest in persecuting the industry; I merely want it to

pay for the damage that it has caused. I have no intention of forcing any argument that the levy should increase. I am just asking for common sense, and for the worst polluters to give 1%. I will then walk away from this argument, quite satisfied that my job is done.

The truth is that the most toxic forms of gambling, which cause extensive harm, have the means to pay for the harm they cause. The industry will say that levels of problematic gambling are low. Tell that to the families at the back in the Gallery who have lost children. Tell them that problem gambling rates are low. We are having this debate because of the industry’s reluctance to do the right thing. It reacts to our reform recommendations with petty name-calling and offers feeble attempts at self-regulation. For a cash-rich industry, its commitment to repairing the damage that it causes or to preventing it from happening in the first place is both pathetic and insulting. If a statutory levy is introduced alongside tackling the question of affordability, ensuring that people are not gambling more than they can afford, we can stop the vast exploitation that we have seen in recent years. If that is brought in alongside stake limits for online gambling, to give parity with land-based venues, we can ensure that people do not fall into the depths of addiction. If it is introduced with meaningful reform of gambling advertising, sponsorship and direct marketing, along with the ending of inducements to gamble, we can prevent the poisonous hold that operators have on people through their addictive products. It is clear to me that, without a statutory levy at the heart of the White Paper, this Government will have missed a once-in-a-generation opportunity to bring analogue legislation into a digital era, to radicalise a toxic environment and—without a shadow of a doubt—to save lives.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** I am just observing how many hon. Members want to speak in the debate. There are five. That means a guideline of about seven minutes for each Member before we come to the winding-up speeches.

9.51 am

**Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con):** It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and thank the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for securing the debate.

With the current review of the Gambling Act 2005 drawing to its long-awaited close—hopefully; we have been here many times before over the last 18 months—this is certainly an opportune moment to be debating this subject. Far too often, emotion, instead of evidence, drives the debate about betting and gaming in this country. Nowhere is that felt more keenly than in the discussion about how problem gambling is tackled through research, education and treatment—RET.

Some 22.5 million British adults enjoy a bet every single month. According to the independent regulator, the rates of problem gambling in the UK are falling, having reduced to 0.2% now from 0.6% just 18 months ago. Although of course one problem gambler is one too many, those figures are positive compared with other European countries. The rate is 2.4% in Italy, 1.4% in Norway and 1.3% in France. One could therefore

[*Scott Benton*]

conclude that the regulated market in Britain is relatively successful in keeping rates of problem gambling fairly low.

For the past few decades, the industry has rightly shouldered the financial responsibility for that work by paying a voluntary levy to fund independent charities tackling problem gambling. Despite that, anti-gambling campaigners are demanding a new, statutory levy on the industry—a tax by another name—to fund RET. That poses one obvious question: would funds generated through a statutory levy and given to the Department of Health and Social Care really make a tangible difference to the delivery of RET and to problem gambling in the UK? The clear answer is no.

The current system is making good progress, and in any event, a blanket levy would not raise materially more money for RET than is raised at present, but it would disproportionately hammer casinos and bingo halls, where just a 1% hit on turnover equates to a 10% hit on profit. That could put many bingo halls, casinos and other land-based operators in places such as Blackpool out of business, costing thousands of jobs and the Exchequer vital revenue, as I alluded to previously.

**Paul Blomfield:** The hon. Gentleman says that the current system is making good progress, but the latest National Gambling Treatment Service statistics from GambleAware show that 49% of users have a risk level that indicates that they remain at risk at the end of their treatment. Does he think that that is good progress?

**Scott Benton:** There is clearly more work that we can do in this area, but it would help if the NHS had a long-term strategy for dealing with the issue, which it lacks at present. I will say more on that point in a few moments.

Under current arrangements, all companies regulated by the Gambling Commission are expected to make a voluntary contribution of 0.1% of turnover. To put that in context, in 2019-20 that figure was £10 million. Most of the funding goes to GambleAware, which is a totally independent charity. The industry has no say whatever on how that money is spent. In its five-year strategy published last year, the charity says that it expects to see that income increase to £39 million by the year ending 2024. As the hon. Member for Swansea East alluded to, the four largest gaming companies—Entain, William Hill, Flutter and Bet365—have agreed to increase their contributions to 1% of turnover. That is an additional £100 million over a four-year period to tackle the issue, with all of that funding going towards tackling and preventing the causes of problem gambling.

As I said in response to the intervention from the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), the NHS still does not have a long-term strategy to tackle problem gambling. It was only in 2019 that the Department of Health announced it would open 15 new NHS clinics for addicts. Despite that, only five are open so far, with three more supposedly coming online later this year. Meanwhile, it is the industry and charities that have spent the last two decades trying to tackle the issue. Currently, charities use about 160 locations for face-to-face counselling services—part of an already

mature network of clinics, treatment centres and outreach programmes that are making a real difference right now.

A statutory levy would risk charities' existing funding models by taking cash out of their coffers and putting it into the NHS, which, sadly, is not yet set up to delivering those services.

**Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP):** Has it crossed the hon. Member's mind that the difficulty for the NHS in rolling out its plan for 15 clinics is the lack of guaranteed funding, which is exactly the strategy that a smart statutory levy would cover?

**Scott Benton:** The issue has been around for decades. Obviously, the gambling review is long awaited. Hopefully, that will help to address the issue, but it is unmistakable that the industry has taken voluntary steps over the years to try to tackle the problem. What we need is a consensus on the most appropriate way forward. For the reasons outlined, I do not think that a statutory levy is the answer, but I am open to hearing all Members' views, so I am attending the debate to hear both sides of the argument.

A clumsy one-size-fits-all approach would have a disproportionate effect on land-based operators, which are only just recovering from the pandemic. In truth, it would be catastrophic on those businesses, because, like the rest of the hospitality sector, they have many fixed costs to fund, including staff, business rates, tax and licences. A tiered system would take that into account and better protect jobs.

**Carolyn Harris:** If the hon. Gentleman refers to *Hansard* to read the comments I made earlier, he will see that I reiterated everything that he has just said, so I do not quite understand his comments.

**Scott Benton:** I suspect the hon. Lady is referring to her opening remarks. I appreciate that she spoke about the differential system between online operators, which she suggested were the worst polluters, and land-based operators. The problem is that many land-based operators run on a very small profit margin, so even a very small statutory levy could put them out of business. The high street is already struggling, and I am afraid it would be a double whammy when we simply do not require it.

**Craig Whittaker:** The one area where we already have a levy is the horse-racing sector, which has a strong link with gambling and betting. What does my hon. Friend feel that an additional levy on that sector will do to those jobs and on horse-racing?

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** Order. I remind hon. Members that seven minutes was the guideline.

**Scott Benton:** Time is short, so I will not directly respond to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), but I suspect he knows my feelings about an additional statutory levy, which is essentially a tax. It could create problems for horse-racing at a time when we are already considering other prohibitive measures that would affect sponsorship, and other elements of the debate that could have a further impact on horse-racing and, indeed, all sports.

Third sector charities are already effective and are making real progress. In contrast, a statutory levy looks like a retrospective solution to a problem that simply does not exist at the level that anti-gamblers want policymakers to believe. Is it really designed to help research, education and treatment, and the wider public as a whole, or is it a punitive measure to placate the anti-gambling lobby? A statutory levy will not boost funding for RET. The money is already in the system, and there is a bigger, broader commitment for the future. The Government need to tread carefully if they are to avoid hurting businesses and putting thousands of jobs at risk.

10.1 am

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a real delight to contribute to a debate under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for her comprehensive and powerful statement of the case, to which it is difficult to add anything.

I simply want to draw on the experience of my constituents, Liz and Charles Ritchie. I am delighted that Liz has been able to join us this morning. Their son, Jack, was one of the more than 400 people estimated each year to take their life due to gambling addiction, but he was never diagnosed with a gambling disorder; he was told by health professionals that he had an addictive personality that he would have to learn to live with. During the inquest into his death, the coroner described gambling warnings, information and treatment as “woefully inadequate”. The coroner’s “Prevention of future deaths” report states:

“The treatment available and received by Jack was insufficient to cure his addiction—this in part was due to a lack of training for medical professionals around...diagnosis and treatment”.

Jack took his life in 2017, but unfortunately things have not changed enough since then. As I said to the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton), according to the latest data from GambleAware, National Gambling Treatment Service statistics show that 49% of users still have a risk level of 3+, indicating that they remain at risk when their treatment has finished. We need to acknowledge, as the gambling review does in a sense, that we need to do more and much better.

Despite the wholly unfortunate characterisation of those of us making this argument as an anti-gambling lobby, I thought the hon. Member for Blackpool South helped our argument considerably when he talked about the inadequacy of provision in the NHS. He is right; that is at the core of our argument. Treatment, public messaging and prevention of harm are not sufficient in the UK to combat the severe harm experienced by gamblers exposed to dangerous products.

The Advisory Board for Safer Gambling explained the problems with the current voluntary system: a lack of transparency, a lack of equity across operators, a record of insufficient funding, and unpredictable voluntary funding that creates barriers to distributing money where it can have the most impact, such as the NHS. We have begun to hear the arguments this morning. The Betting and Gaming Council often boasts about how its leading members volunteered to boost their joint funding of education and treatment services to £100 million during the 2019-23 period. That figure of £100 million—plucked from the air—over four years is not generous; it is a tiny

proportion of the extraordinary profits those members make from other people’s difficulties. Most importantly, it does not come close to tackling the scale of the task we face.

As the hon. Member for Blackpool South pointed out, there are only five gambling treatment centres in the UK, with two further centres planned to be opened this year. That is against a background in which research published by Public Health England last September estimated that about 0.5% of the adult population—about a quarter of a million people—are likely to have some form of gambling addiction, with some 2.2 million either problem gamblers or at risk of addiction.

According to research by the University of Bristol—this is a figure that we really need to stop and think about—55,000 children under the age of 15 have a gambling addiction. Jack’s addiction started while he was at school. A statutory levy is vital to ensure we have the sufficient funds to meet the challenge presented by gambling as it operates now. The levy must be independently collected and channelled into the NHS, so that the industry does not have undue influence over its allocation; my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East made that point powerfully.

There is a recent proposal from the Social Market Foundation to administer the levy through an independent levy board, which would allocate resource and ensure that the NHS services required are sufficiently funded. Existing organisations funded by the industry have an obvious conflict of interest and cannot fulfil that function. We are beginning to move away from the individual responsibility model and attitude to gambling problems towards a public health approach. As we do that, we need to change the Gambling Commission’s third objective, so that it has a clear responsibility to minimise gambling harm by protecting the whole population.

**John Spellar:** Will my hon. Friend reflect on the statement made by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who argued that the black market is greatly overestimated? I caution that that is always the response of the bureaucrats who provide the figures. It was true on cigarette smuggling, red diesel fraud and self-employment fraud, as well as many other areas. There is always a tendency to underestimate what goes on in the sub-economy. Is there not a danger that this issue will also be underestimated, if we over-regulate?

**Paul Blomfield:** As I said in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East, from my experience of tackling the payday lending industry on a cross-party basis, the argument that it came up with to defend its own profits was, “Be afraid of illegal loan sharks, so do nothing about us and the misery that we are causing, because there is that threat out there.” We need to tackle both. That strategy needs to be developed and funded by a statutory levy.

Let me return to Jack’s case and the conclusions that were raised at his inquest by the coroner, who insisted that, despite small changes in regulation and treatment since Jack’s death, significantly more needs to be done by the state to protect people. Crucially, Jack did not know his addiction was not his fault. Liz and Charles think that if his addiction had been recognised as a health problem and treated more effectively—if he had

[Paul Blomfield]

been given the correct information and the doctors had been better informed—he could still be alive today, and so would many others.

Medical experts agree. Dr Matt Gaskell, who leads the NHS Northern Gambling Clinic, explained to the inquest that the treatment Jack received was insufficient, and he spoke about the impact gambling has on the brain, causing major changes as addiction develops quickly. He underlined that the whole public are at risk, not just a vulnerable few, and I know that that is also the view of the Minister responsible, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who has previously said that gambling harm could affect any of us.

Obviously, a new approach is needed—one that promotes harm prevention and information about risk, as well as treatment and provision for early diagnosis. We have the skills and knowledge in our NHS, but we need the investment to make those services available to all who might need them. The hon. Member for Blackpool South said the NHS should be doing much more, and he is right, but the big flaw in his argument is that that should not be at the cost of other NHS services. It should be based on the “polluter pays” principle: those who do the harm should cover the cost of addressing it.

On the intervention made by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), the levy should be set at the rate necessary to cover the costs of mitigating the harm and providing the treatment. If the problem gets worse, the levy may have to go higher; if it is reduced as a consequence of effective treatment, the levy may go lower. The levy should be responsive and based on the “polluter pays” principle. However, I am conscious of the time and of the fact that you are glaring at me, Mr Betts, so I will finish on that point. I hope that the Government recognise the power of these arguments.

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** The guideline is now that speeches should be six minutes. Can we try to stick to that, to make sure all colleagues get in?

10.11 am

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is always a privilege to serve under your suzerainty in these matters, Mr Betts. I am sorry that there is not a whole bank of media here to report this important debate. Something else seems to be going on in the House that has taken them away, although I cannot think what that is or was.

We do not have a lot of time, so I will keep this short. I say to some of my colleagues who have interests—I have nothing against that; it is important in helping them to keep in contact with what goes on outside—that I wish they would not keep repeating the idea that anybody who wants to deal with the harms that occur as a result of gambling, much as we would if we were talking about alcohol or illegal drugs, is somehow completely and utterly opposed to things that are legal.

The reality is that I, for one, happily bet when I go horse-racing, as I do occasionally. I like to go to the ring, because it is the most free market area of all, and I love it—I love walking around looking for the best

odds. That, for me, is fine. I do not, therefore, have any problem with gambling, and I defend it endlessly. Some of my constituents have businesses in the ring, although many lost their businesses when the National Joint Pitch Council was formed, which was a travesty.

I simply say to my colleagues: please stop this nonsense that people such as Mr Dugher and others go on about! It is nonsense to suggest that someone who is in favour of some kind of help, support or assistance for those who have serious difficulties—as the families present are—is opposed to the whole idea of gambling. We could not stop gambling tomorrow if we tried, because people like to bet on things. That is the nature of it. However, the case for the statutory levy being debated today makes absolute sense. The argument that having a levy will somehow drive everybody into the black market is silly. I have always found that when one makes extreme arguments in this place, one loses the case.

I say honestly to some of my colleagues—those who have interests—that it would be a good idea to say to the gambling industry that things have to change. We did all of this in relation to fixed odds betting terminals, and we were given the same arguments then: it would be a disaster, it was terrible, it would end up with gambling collapsing and people going into the black market, and all the rest of it. Those extreme arguments do not work, because they lessen the point.

I come back to my genuinely hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), for whom I have huge regard, as he knows. I agree with him on pretty much everything, and I agree with him today. He is taking the right course, which is to look at how this issue can be resolved, rather than simply saying, “If you do anything, you are going to destroy gambling.” The gambling industry will destroy itself if it spends its whole time opposing everything with these doom-and-gloom scenarios. That will just make people think that it has something to hide.

I will not repeat my arguments on the statutory levy, because I do not have a lot of time. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris)—in this case, I will call her my hon. Friend—made her arguments well, so I will stand on those. It is true that all the reports show that we have to have a statutory levy. Not to have one would be unfair to many of those responsible companies that wish to do something but that find that others—some of which have a lot of money but are irresponsible—do less than they should. The way to do this is to find a way to pay a proportion back to help those who have problems and to improve things.

I agree with the comments that have been made about the health service. Every time money is put into it, that money goes into all sorts of places, but not necessarily where we might want it to go, so a statutory gambling levy must be ringfenced to tackle the harms that are created. In a way, ringfencing would limit the amount we need, because as we put more money in, we hopefully reduce the harms. In terms of some of the other reforms, if things such as the abuse of VIP rooms are taken out of the equation, I sense that the level of harm would be reduced to a manageable level—I doubt it will ever be eradicated, but we would get it to a manageable level.

I just want a bit of common sense in this debate. Let us engage with the idea of a levy. Personally, I would be happy to look at the case for saying that we do not shift it for a set period of years. Perhaps we can look later at

varying it in degrees if there is a reduction in the level of harm, but that is a debate to be had. What we should be debating is how that levy comes in and is managed, and how we can give some guarantees to companies that this is not simply a rolling tax increase. I accept that that is where we should be with this debate.

In a previous debate, three hon. Friends, who are not here today, read out speeches written by Bet365, and I did not think that that did this place any good at all. In truth, we are here for our judgment, not for somebody else's judgment. I have no objection to Members standing up for the gambling industry and defending it; that is absolutely right and exactly what this place is all about. However, I do object to the fact that we sometimes think that we have to just say what the industry wants us to say—we do not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley is right that we should recognise that there is a problem and that there may be a way of dealing with it. We must come together, across parties, to resolve that problem. I encourage my hon. Friend the Minister to tell his colleagues in Downing Street, "Just think about how we could do this, not whether we should do it." If we can get to that point, the White Paper will make sense. We should make sure it is a proper paper that deals with the problems and recognises that the industry will not simply go away.

If the harms can be dealt with, we can have a reasonable, decent industry that recognises and faces up to its issues and problems without running away from them. We will then have fewer people, and their families, being destroyed by addictions that have come about because of the pressures that have mounted up on them. If we can do all that, we will have done a service in this place. On that basis, I would be happy to discuss with anybody how we get this done.

10.17 am

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and congratulate her on securing the debate and on the passionate way she outlined the case for the Government to act faster to introduce a statutory levy.

Gambling-related harm is an issue that many, including myself, care deeply about, not least because of the detrimental impact it has on society as a whole, but also because it is far closer to home. Gambling-related harm runs through my constituency. Its impact is felt by people with lived experience of gambling harm and their family and friends. Faced with the real-life stories of my constituents, I simply cannot understand how anyone does not support reform. The mere fact that gambling harm is happening every day is proof enough that our current gambling regulatory system is failing us.

The voluntary system, which relies on the goodwill of the industry, has been woefully inadequate. The current system has no integration of NHS services, as we have heard, and also no consistency on funding decisions and no co-ordinated oversight of research into harms. What is more, there are serious questions to be asked about the independence of the voluntary system from the influence of the gambling industry.

We can see that the scale of the problem is huge, and yet there is so much to uncover. A mandatory levy in statute is an essential step for generating funding towards research, prevention and treatment services. Researching and growing our knowledge base will allow us to better understand the extent of the issue and, importantly, tackle it effectively, driving support and funds towards NHS treatment and support networks. Most importantly, that would be free from the influence of the industry that is perpetuating the harm that we are trying to treat.

The time has come for the onus to be placed on the betting industry to address gambling harms. It must be held to account for the damage it has inflicted through dangerous marketing and customer practices. The asks that myself and my colleagues have outlined today are rooted in a desire to help build a society where the risk of real harm from gambling is no longer accepted. The time for that is now long overdue, and the Government must take action. With the publishing of the White Paper, and everything that comes with it, there is an opportunity to take action. To keep to your time limit, Mr Betts, I will conclude by saying that I look forward to the Minister's response. I hope he can reassure us that the Government are listening and will take the appropriate action.

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** Last but not least, I call Jim Shannon. If the hon. Member can finish before half-past 10, that will allow time for the winding-up speeches.

10.20 am

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I will keep to your timeframe, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend—she certainly is my hon. Friend—the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing the debate. There are very few debates that she secures that I am not here to support, but this one is of particular interest to me, and I will explain why. I should also declare an interest as a member of the all-party parliamentary group for gambling related harm.

There have been some incredible speeches from Opposition Members, and also from the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who put forward in a very succinct and helpful way what is very much my own line of thought. This is not about being anti-gambling; it is about how we can use the levy in a way that addresses the issue of addiction, while hopefully giving some of the money to the NHS, as the hon. Member for Swansea East said.

It is clear that gambling addiction is a significant public health issue: it ruins families, marriages and communities, and in extreme circumstances it can lead to suicide. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) referred to one of his constituents who had been affected, and there are families in the Public Gallery today who have also been affected. I am ever mindful of Peter and Sadie Keogh from County Fermanagh—they are not my constituents, but they came to my attention some time ago because of the issue of addiction and gambling. I have examples from my constituency of people who have been addicted to gambling, and although it did not lead to suicide, they found themselves under incredible pressure that affected their families. Gambling can lead to financial pressures in the house, arguments and ultimately the break-up of marriages.

[Jim Shannon]

Peter and Sadie Keogh lost their son Lewis. Their story is mirrored by the stories of those who are here today and by the stories of addiction told by others. Lewis found himself gambling and did not realise how deep the problem was getting. His mum and dad were probably not aware of everything that was happening, but they were when Lewis unfortunately took his own life. That came about because his debts had overcome him. His ability to respond and to discuss matters in their totality with his parents and friends led him to think there was only one way out. I am here today for Lewis, Peter and Sadie Keogh from Fermanagh in Northern Ireland, and for all the others in Northern Ireland who have succumbed to suicide because of gambling addiction.

The harms of gambling addiction are an indisputable fact, and yet we have limited protections in place to support the most vulnerable in society. Chronic underinvestment in the gambling treatment system has led to a situation where treatment is unregulated and lacks consistency, transparency and accountability. Between only 2% and 3% of people with gambling problems enter the treatment system, and nearly all of them enter through self-referral—we need to look at that. The gambling industry is hugely well resourced, and it could and should be doing so much more to identify and protect vulnerable people.

A 1% smart levy on the industry's revenues would provide £130 million—an increase of over £100 million on what we currently receive. What the hon. Member for Swansea East and most of us here today are saying is that that is not a big amount for the sector, but it will make a big difference. If the DCMS introduces a smart statutory levy on the gambling industry—that is already within the power of the Secretary of State—it can take control of the funding for research, education and, ultimately, treatment back from the bookies, set up a long-term funding commitment, allow clinicians and academics to commit to projects and programmes properly and safeguard the independence of research and education to ensure that the gambling industry can no longer mark its own homework. If such a levy were based on the “polluter pays” principle, it would not punish the bingo halls and the high street arcades that support local high street communities across the UK, but instead would force gambling operators who are all too often based offshore to pay for the harm that they undoubtedly fuel.

Compared with the other regions of the United Kingdom, the level of participation in gambling in Northern Ireland is higher. In England, the rate is 62%, and in Wales, it is 61.3%, but the rate in Northern Ireland, which is similar to the most recent recorded participation rate in Scotland, is 67.8%. Compared with the other regions of the United Kingdom, the proportion of the population in Northern Ireland found to be problem gamblers is also higher, at 2.3%. In Wales, it is 1.1%, in Scotland, it is 0.7%, and in England, it is 0.5%. We have a serious gambling problem in Northern Ireland, and our numbers outstrip those in the other three countries put together.

I always look forward to seeing the Minister, who is always incredibly helpful. He looks to help and reassure. I ask him what discussions he has had with his counterpart

in Northern Ireland about gambling addiction and the fact that the rate in Northern Ireland are higher than in the rest of the United Kingdom put together. What steps can be taken to assist, help or advise the Northern Ireland Assembly Ministers?

The report on participation in gambling identified the four most common types of gambling in Northern Ireland as the national lottery; scratchcards or instant win; betting on an event or sport; and other lotteries, raffles and ballots. Sometimes, when I am in the garages back home getting petrol or diesel, I see people buying scratchcards, and I sometimes feel quite moved. That scratchcard is their hope of getting money to help with whatever it may be—to pay the bills—but that scratchcard is a gambler's chance. It is very unusual for it to lead to any income.

Some types of gambling cannot be regulated in a meaningful way, but some can, and I believe that the levy is an essential tool in regulation. I encourage the Government and the Minister to see where the problem lies and to tackle it at the root. The purpose of a gambling statutory levy is to generate moneys to help those with addictions and to assist their families, and to help the NHS. It is right that the gambling sector should pay more. In my opinion, and that of many others, the publication of a White Paper cannot come soon enough. I urge the Minister and his colleagues in Government to take the opportunity to deliver meaningful change where the industry quite clearly has not yet done so.

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** We move on to the Front Bench spokespeople, who have 10 minutes each. After that, there will be a short time for the mover to wind up at the end. I call Ronnie Cowan for the SNP.

10.28 am

**Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP):** Thank you very much, Mr Betts. It is a pleasure to be here this morning. I thank the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for bringing forward this debate.

Gambling legislation is reserved to Westminster. The UK Government must publish the gambling review White Paper and that must include a smart levy on the gambling industry. In December 2020, Westminster announced a review of the Gambling Act 2005, which generated some 16,000 responses to a call for evidence. Yet, in June 2022, we are still no further forward from where we were in December 2020.

I have been told that the White Paper is “imminent”, “very imminent” and even “very, very imminent”, but there is still no date. Once the paper is published, there is still quite a journey before it becomes law and no doubt there will be an implementation period, too. While we dither, gambling-related harms impact vulnerable people in an unabated manner, so we must act, and act now.

We are rapidly approaching the summer recess. Minister, we need the paper now, so that it can be scrutinised and debated. We need to make substantial progress before the summer recess. We are here today, of course, to debate a statutory levy. However, I confess to being slightly confused after reading the Library briefing on this issue. Excellent as such briefings always are, this one informed me that the Gambling Act 2005 regulates

gambling in Great Britain. The Act has three licensing objectives: preventing gambling from being a source of crime or disorder; ensuring that gambling is conducted in a fair and open way; and protecting children and other vulnerable persons from being harmed or exploited by gambling.

The 2005 Act is overseen and enforced by the Gambling Commission and that is where I got confused. Under section 123 of the Act, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport can make regulations requiring gambling companies to pay an annual levy to the Gambling Commission. Section 123 clearly states:

“The regulations shall, in particular, make provision for—

- (a) the amount of the levy;
  - (b) timing of payment of the levy.
- (3) The regulations shall, in particular, make provision for—
- (a) determining the amount of the levy by reference to a percentage of specified receipts of an operating licence holder,
  - (b) determining the amount of the levy by reference to a percentage of specified profits of an operating licence holder”.

And more points are set out. Reading this section, it looks to me and reads to me as a smart statutory levy. Minister, why has section 123 of the 2005 Act never been commenced? Why are the Government not implementing a statutory levy now?

Currently, the Gambling Commission requires all licensed operators to make a voluntary contribution of 0.1% of net revenue towards the research, prevention and treatment of gambling-related harm. Most operators donate to GambleAware, a charity that commissions support for problem gamblers as well as research and awareness-raising about gambling-related harm.

In July 2019, the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), who was then the Secretary of State, announced that five of the largest operators would increase their donations from 0.1% to 1% over the following four years. However, the current funding arrangement does not generate enough money to prevent and treat gambling-related harm. In a September 2020 paper for the Gambling Commission, the Advisory Board for Safer Gambling said the current funding system was

“no longer fit for purpose”.

That is nearly two years ago now.

A statutory levy would address issues of transparency, independence, equity, sustainability and public confidence. It would also have the potential to raise

“significantly greater levels of funding”

and it would also guarantee funding, so that service providers can confidently plan to recruit and train into the future. And it is not just me who is saying this. In April 2022, GambleAware called on the Government to introduce a mandatory levy of 1% of gross gambling yield. According to GambleAware, this would raise £140 million annually and would

“enable better longer-term planning and commissioning for services to prevent gambling harms”.

Unfortunately, the Betting and Gaming Council is part of the problem. In a May 2022 blog, Brigid Simmonds, Chair of the Betting and Gaming Council, claimed that a statutory levy would not make a “tangible difference” to research, education and treatment or to problem gambling rates. She said that the current funding system was “making good progress” and warned that the “clumsy

one-size-fits-all approach” of a statutory levy would have a “disproportionate effect” on land-based operators that were just recovering from the covid-19 pandemic.

“Making good progress”—where is the evidence for that? The clock is ticking, people are being harmed and people are dying. And nobody is talking about a “clumsy one-size-fits-all approach”. We have identified that we require a smart levy—the polluter pays. It is callous remarks like those from the Chair of the Betting and Gaming Council that clearly show that the funds raised by a levy must be ring-fenced and allocated to NHS-commissioned work. The expenditure should be identified and allocated by medical experts, and not by the gambling industry, their appointees or politicians.

More often than not, the debate about this issue has come down to money. How do we pay for the outcomes that we seek? Where does that money come from? However, we must acknowledge here today that behind the call for money, the reality is that people are being harmed and people are dying. We need appropriate, timely action and the time for it is now.

10.34 am

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Betts. I pass on the apologies of the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), who is in Committee, as indeed is the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp)—although it is always a pleasure to see the Minister across the Chamber.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing this debate and on her, as always, excellent and comprehensive speech. I congratulate all hon. Members who have taken part, including my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones). My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) spoke powerfully about his constituent Jack, and importantly identified the shortfall in diagnosis and treatment, and the lack of specialist gambling support across the country. I have had a number of meetings with former gambling addicts, and they have often identified that it is really hard to get treatment where they want, as there is a bit of a postcode lottery. Anybody who suggests that an increase in funding is not necessary for the support and treatment of gambling addicts is completely wrong. We have a decided lack of specialist treatment, and we really need to get extra funding into it. That is the heart of the issue.

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) was absolutely correct when he said that the people speaking in this debate are not anti-gambling; we are anti-gambling harm. We need to make that important distinction.

As I said when we most recently debated gambling in this place, reform is long overdue and the Government have been dragging their feet. Many forms of gambling are a pastime that lots of people enjoy. They are a source of employment and economic activity for communities in towns and cities across the country. Nobody sensible wants to send gambling to the underground or the black market, but we have to recognise that it can also be a highly addictive activity that damages families and communities. That is why we need

[Jeff Smith]

action, not more words, from the Government. Time and time again, as we have heard, we have been promised legislation only for it not to materialise.

As we have heard from a number of hon. Members—I have heard this graphically from the relatives of people who have died by suicide and from former gambling addicts—the business models of some gambling companies, and some gambling products, add to significant harms, leading to high levels of problem gambling, mental health issues and, sadly, suicides. Regulation is long overdue, particularly since the huge growth in online and mobile gambling. Smartphones give opportunities to gamble pretty much anywhere, anytime, and the unregulated online spaces fail to protect users.

As we have heard, the Gambling Act 2005 is the basis for the regulation of gambling in Great Britain, but it has not been updated since it was passed and it is not fit for the digital age. The key Conservative manifesto pledge in 2019 was to review gambling laws in response to mounting concerns about how this £14 billion-a-year industry is regulated. The White Paper was originally due to be published before the end of 2021. Labour has been calling on the Government to bring forward gambling legislation for a long time. In 2019, we also committed to introducing a gambling Act.

The delay in tackling this issue is costing money as well as lives. The Public Health England review found that the annual economic burden of harmful gambling is £1.27 billion. That is £647 million in direct costs to the Government and £619 million of wider societal costs associated with suicides. It is about not just lives but money, and we need to address that issue.

Will the Minister confirm when exactly we will see the White Paper? We definitely need to see it in the coming weeks. I agree with the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) that we need to see it long before the summer so we can start discussing these issues. It needs to build on the consensus across the House that we need to bring this regulation into the digital age.

The all-party parliamentary group for gambling related harm, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East, who has campaigned magnificently on this issue, recommended a mandatory levy on the gambling industry to fund research, protection, treatment and education, and address gambling-related harms, including to consider the links between gambling and suicide. At the moment, as we have heard, gambling firms have no mandatory requirement to fund addiction research and treatment services. Many do so through the voluntary scheme, but it is variable and uncertain. That uncertainty makes it difficult to plan long-term projects.

The five big gambling companies have committed to paying 1% of their gross yields towards safer gambling initiatives by 2023, but the variation between online products and their donations is a real issue. The legal power to impose a levy on the gambling industry has existed since 2005, but it has never been used due to the Government's insistence that the industry should support harm-reduction work on a voluntary basis. I think that the highest figure was last year, with £35 million coming through voluntary donations. It has been estimated that a statutory levy would increase that to around £140 million, but we must put that in perspective: the gambling

industry spends £1.5 billion a year just on advertising. That is the scale of the issue. The Government must take this proposal seriously.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East made the important point that a levy should be smart or differentiated to tackle the most dangerous forms of gambling without harming, for example, bingo halls. I should be grateful if the Minister would outline what consideration the Government have given the proposal. We need clarity about what will be in the White Paper and how a statutory levy might work. We absolutely need to tackle gambling harm across the board, so that the families of those who have been immeasurably harmed by gambling can have confidence that what has happened to their loved ones will not happen to others.

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** May I ask the Minister to ensure that there are a couple of minutes left for the mover to reply?

10.41 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston):** Thank you, Mr Betts. It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship and I will ensure that there is time at the end for the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) to reply. I thank her for securing the debate and thank all those who have contributed today, articulating a variety of views in a genuinely constructive manner. She has been a staunch campaigner for gambling reform for a very long time and I thank her and other parliamentarians for the many meetings that they have had with DCMS Ministers over recent months and years. As has been mentioned, I am not the responsible Minister for gambling: the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), is unavoidably detained in a Bill Committee but I will ensure that he gets a full read-out of today's debate.

It has been 17 years since the Gambling Act 2005 was passed and it is clear that the risks around harm and the opportunities to prevent it are different now from when that legislation was introduced. We must act to recognise that our regulatory framework needs to change. In recent years, the Government and the Gambling Commission have introduced a wide range of reforms to help protect, support and treat people who are experiencing gambling harms. The protections include the ban on credit card gambling, the fixed odds betting terminal stake reduction and reform to VIP schemes, as well as ongoing work to improve and expand treatment provision through the NHS and third sector. The review is an opportunity to build on those changes and ensure that we have the right protections in place to prevent harm.

As the hon. Member for Swansea East will appreciate, I cannot pre-announce what will be published in the White Paper, which we are finalising, nor can I comment on speculation in the media and elsewhere about its contents. However, I can say that I absolutely recognise the importance of sufficient and transparent funding for research to strengthen our evidence base, as well as for treatment to help those who need support. As part of the wide-ranging scope of the review—it is widely recognised as being wide-ranging—we called for evidence on the best way to recoup the regulatory and societal



costs of gambling. We have been clear for several years that, should the existing system of taxation and voluntary contributions fail to deliver what is needed, we would look at a number of options for reform including, but not limited to, a statutory levy.

As hon. Members know, when the Gambling Act was introduced, the gambling industry agreed to provide financial support for tackling problem gambling, and the Gambling Commission requires operators to make an annual contribution to approved organisations, which deliver or support research on the prevention and treatment of gambling-related harms, as a licence condition. We considered that issue closely in 2018 as part of the previous gambling review, when much of the debate centred on the quantity of funding provided by the industry. Since then, there have been a number of changes to how much is given and how it is managed.

Since 2018 the Gambling Commission has improved transparency around the amount given by the industry to research, education and treatment, and which bodies it is paid to, and required operators to donate to organisations approved by the commission. Most donate to GambleAware, an independent charity with no industry involvement in commissioning decisions, and the funding in the system has also increased substantially. In 2019, the four largest operators committed themselves to increasing their contributions tenfold, including £100 million for treatment over the following four years. I think the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) mentioned that contributions under the voluntary system were indeed £34 million last year, and they are due to reach £70 million by 2024. By way of context, £34 million is about 0.3% of GGY, which is about £10.2 billion.

Alongside that, the Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS are taking forward work to improve and expand treatment provision. The 2019 NHS long-term plan gave a commitment to expand the coverage of NHS services for people with serious gambling problems and announced the creation of 15 specialist gambling clinics by 2023-24, with £15 million of funding over the same period.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) and others have commented, there are five NHS specialist clinics in operation, with a further three due to become operational by the end of this month. The Department of Health and Social Care is working with the NHS and GambleAware to help to improve the join-up between NHS and third-sector services, and to develop a clear treatment pathway for people seeking help.

The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) again raised the tragic case of Jack Ritchie. In March, the hon. Gentleman secured an Adjournment debate on the coroner's finding that gambling contributed to Jack's tragic death. As the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South, said then, the findings are an important call to action for our Department, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education.

As we said in our response to the coroner, the Government are committed to building on the reforms made since 2017 and addressing the concerns identified in the prevention of future deaths report. The coroner's report and lessons arising from Jack's tragic death are important inputs to our considerations and the review of the Gambling Act. I can assure hon. Members that,

overall, the voice of people with personal or lived experience of harm was thoroughly represented among the submissions to our call for evidence, and I and my successors leading the review have met a number of people who have suffered because of their addictions or those of the people they love. I thank them for their contribution to the debate and the evidence gathering.

As part of the review, we are looking closely at the barriers to high-quality research, which were mentioned by many hon. Members, and how we can overcome those barriers. Building the evidence base to deepen our understanding of gambling can involve the input of a range of groups, including the Gambling Commission, researchers and the third sector. A good example is the research commissioned by GambleAware on the impacts of marketing and advertising on children and young people.

The research showed the impact that certain aspects of gambling advertising can have on young people, including depictions of the association between football and gambling, which I know is a hot topic. That pointed to the need for change to ensure that the UK advertising codes continue to provide effective protection from gambling advertising-related harms. The research has led to the Committee of Advertising Practice announcing stronger protections, which will be backed by the enforcement powers of the Gambling Commission. Those include banning content with strong appeal to children from gambling advertisements, as well as further changes to protect vulnerable people. Research on gambling, like any other subject, is funded by the research councils, and we want to encourage more researchers from a wide variety of disciplines to work in this area. We will say more about that in the White Paper.

I will briefly mention a few other points raised by hon. Members during the debate. The Gambling Commission has piloted a new methodology to measure problem gambling, and that is being worked on. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned gambling in Northern Ireland. Gambling is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, but I believe new legislation is being brought forward there. I can confirm that officials have met to share experiences regarding the Great British legislation and regulations, so the conversations are ongoing.

On the effectiveness of GambleAware services, 70% of people who started treatment as problem gamblers were no longer defined as such on the problem gambling severity index at the end of treatment, and 92% saw their score reduced, so there is evidence of some impact.

Several Members raised the important role of the gambling sector's tax contribution to the economy and the fact that those tax revenues are then used to fund our public services, including the NHS. Everybody has recognised, today or previously, that gambling can be performed safely by millions of people every year. Again, a very clear message from Members today is that nobody is advocating a complete ban on gambling. Of course, any changes must be proportionate and evidence-based, and where possible they must avoid unintended consequences.

The Government have an important responsibility to get reform right. We will build on the many strong aspects of our existing gambling regulatory system to make sure it is right for the digital age and the future. The White Paper is a priority for the Department and

[Nigel Huddleston]

we will publish it in the coming weeks, which is precisely the wording that the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington asked for.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to today's debate.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Will my hon. Friend define what “coming weeks” means? When is a coming week no longer a coming week? Is it two or three weeks ahead, or four or five? A little definition would help.

**Nigel Huddleston:** I can say no more than that we will be publishing in the coming weeks. I am afraid that my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South is currently detained elsewhere, so the coming weeks is all I can say today.

**Ronnie Cowan:** I asked the Minister a question about section 123 of the Gambling Act. I do not understand why it has not been enacted.

**Nigel Huddleston:** The answer lies in the evidence given in the debate today. As I have said, we are looking at the Gambling Act review and considering the options and the arguments made today, but there is not 100% support for that at the moment. We committed to looking at that as part of the review, and I am afraid the hon. Gentleman will have to wait for the report to come out in the coming weeks.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I will make sure that the Minister responsible gets a full report of today's debate.

10.53 am

**Carolyn Harris:** I thank the Minister for his response. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions today. I even thank adversaries; I hope we can find common ground on this issue. Every reform that the gambling industry has endured—it has been an endurance for it—has not been done voluntarily; it has come kicking and screaming. There are people here who are providing a voice for the industry. My motivation and that of others here is to provide a voice for those people at the back who have paid the greatest sacrifice. The status quo can no longer be allowed to continue. We have to ensure that the White Paper protects everyone in future from the same tragedy that those families have had to experience.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered proposals for a statutory gambling levy.

10.54 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## GPs and Primary Care (North East Bedfordshire)

11 am

**Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to GPs and primary care in North East Bedfordshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and to welcome the Minister to her place. The reasons for this debate are, in essence, two of the main commitments that I made when standing for election in 2019: to promote access to local services; and to maintain the rural character of North East Bedfordshire, in the light of high levels of persistent housing development stretching back over a number of years. Those issues are related, but each of them also has certain distinct resolutions.

What has informed me, in calling for the debate, is that over the past six months I have spent a considerable amount of time speaking to GPs and primary care staff across my constituency. I have listened to their points of view and analysed information from their practices. I commend the work of our GPs and their staff, most particularly in the period through covid. I will touch on some of my concerns about how GPs were feeling and about morale over that period when I talk a bit about the responses I have had from constituents in my email inbox.

The debate is also informed by previous debates about the impact of development and of population on access to health services, such as GPs and dentists, although the latter are not my primary focus today—I have participated in debates led by my hon. Friends the Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). My inbox, however, has been full of emails from constituents on the issue of access to GPs.

This will be known to the Minister, but I always think it is useful for Ministers to hear directly from constituents, so I will briefly quote three of mine. One wrote:

“My wife is 75 and in acute pain. She can barely walk. Several days last week and yesterday she has been attempting to see a GP...she phones at 8 am and eventually gets through some 2 hours later. She is then told there are no appointments remaining that day!, and that she should phone the next day at 8 am to try again. This same pattern is repeated day after day. Hours and hours spent listening to a recorded message with zero result.”

Another constituent wrote:

“I am writing to you about the absolute terrible Healthcare Centre... I've phoned the surgery 3 times last week to be told they have no appointments...this is disgraceful. I rang again today to be told no appointments available again today and to phone 111. Apparently they have to hold appointments for 111 to allocate. The lady from 111...told me to go to A&E to sit there for hours on end to see a doctor”.

The third constituent wrote:

“I have tried phoning the practice at 8 am as told to in order to arrange a telephone conversation. For about 50 minutes the dialling tone cut off with a message saying the line was overloaded. Thus, redialling over and over again was necessary (not something it is pleasant to do when feeling unwell). Eventually you may get through to be told you are in a queue. When you finally get through to a receptionist you are told that GPs are only taking emergency calls. When querying what I should do now, I was told to try again tomorrow at 8 am.”

Such issues are, to a certain extent, part of the recovery from covid and of the post-covid period, but they also highlight issues of concern more generally. The Minister must recognise the irritation of my constituents at the requirement to repeat and repeat a process in order to do something as simple as seeing someone in primary care for their health needs. Further irritation comes from the pressure on the ability to find an appointment within a reasonable amount of time.

That also has a significant impact on the morale of staff in GP practices. Given people's problems getting through, they are naturally at a rather heightened level of irritation, and that has often spilled over into abuse of staff. The Minister will agree that there is never a rationale or reason for any of us to be abusive towards staff who are trying to do their best.

I will share with the Minister some data on my area. As of April 2021, the patient-to-GP ratio of my clinical commissioning group area, which covers Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes, was ranked eighth highest of 106 clinical commissioning groups, with 2,169 patients per GP, against last year's average of 1,772 patients per GP. I have looked at the data running back to 2014—I am grateful to the local medical council for helping me with it. From 2014 to 2022, the list size for GPs in my constituency—a subset of the clinical commissioning group area—grew by 13%, compared with national growth of 8%, so it is growing considerably faster than in other areas of the country.

Let us look now at personnel. For the same period of 2014 to 2022, the total headcount of qualified GPs grew by 2.1% nationally but fell by 2.2% in North East Bedfordshire. Over that eight-year period, the number of GP partners fell by more than a quarter. Those staffing numbers are troubling. The CCG area has 2,169 patients per GP, but for practices that serve my constituents the number is 2,482 patients per GP—up 28% in eight years. I point out to the Minister that housing growth in my constituency is already three times the national average. That problem will not go away, and nor will it stay the same; it is going to get worse.

I will go through some specific findings from my discussions with GPs. The first is fairly obvious: GPs—and I and my constituents—think that primary care in North East Bedfordshire is under severe strain. One GP told me:

“The vulnerability of the service provided by GPs in my area was off the scale large”.

I believe that my constituency is actually a test case for our Conservative manifesto commitment to infrastructure first. I will raise some points about that in a minute.

In my view, and in the view of the GPs with whom I have spoken, remuneration systems provide insufficient incentives for GP partners to take on additional responsibilities. If we wish to stem the decline in GP partners, the Government have to show by words, actions and remuneration that they value the additional work that partners take on to enable broader provision of primary care in their local practices. More generally, pay systems provide more reward, rather than less, for GPs who pick and choose their hours rather than work full time. On the issue of locums versus salaried GPs versus partners, what is the Government's strategy and what is their preference? My view is that the partner

model has worked well historically and is the best model for the future, and even if the Minister agrees, there should be some substantial changes to how the remuneration systems work.

The NHS provides practices with payments based on hitting specific targets set at a national level, or sometimes a local level, such as the qualities and outcomes framework and the investment and impact fund. I hear that some of those targets can be onerous and the benefit is outweighed by the bureaucratic cost of achieving them. I worry that there is a tendency to prioritise bureaucratic target setting and undermine the professionalism, integrity and insight of GPs. We have to recognise that GP partners are some of the best qualified people in the country. To drive them to little target boxes that they have to check is in some ways a little bit demeaning to what a GP thinks is best for their patient. I can see that there is a need, but I think that perhaps the Government are overdoing the balance, towards bureaucracy.

This is perhaps a very minor point, but to me it sounds quite significant if it is true. I was intrigued when I learnt that GPs cannot create a corporate shield against personal liability when they wish to become a leaseholder of property. Normally, if someone is in business, for example, and they are a director or chief executive, their personal liability is not put on the line for a lease that they sign. I was given this impression, and perhaps the Minister can write to me with an answer to this question: is it right that there is no personal liability shield on this issue? That seems to me an unnecessary disincentive to becoming a GP partner.

Increasing the pathways to contact GPs is significantly under way. These range from face-to-face consultations, to e-consultations, to phone consultations. This is currently adding to the frustrations both of my constituents and of some of my local GPs, but there are signs and reasons for hope that the change can be for the better. Some constituents greatly prefer the opportunity to have a phone consultation. Although 50% of phone consultations require a face-to-face follow-up, 50% do not. That creates opportunities for scale economies in telemedicine. One practice that tracks those changes very carefully has been positively encouraged by the reduction in missed appointments for face-to-face consultation, which is a real saving of GP time. I would encourage the Minister to pursue further those efforts for new pathways but to recognise that there will be teething problems as we broaden things out.

Similarly, the broadening out of clinical roles—particularly those of paramedics, nursing roles and other direct patient care positions—in primary care is generally welcomed by GPs, but they would make the point, and I make it to the Minister, that there remains patient resistance to seeing someone other than “my GP”, even if seeing them is not required, and that it can remain a bottleneck. Also, that will not be a full answer to the issue of GP access, even in the long term.

I also heard that the relationship between primary care and secondary care has become a little fraught post covid. I am not sure that it has always been the most harmonious, if I am being honest. But will the Minister look or has she looked at the additional roles that GPs took on during covid to relieve pressure on hospitals, to see whether the balance is right and whether the remuneration is still right or whether there needs to be some clarification on those roles?

[Richard Fuller]

Similarly, there is the issue of the relationship between GPs and pharmacies, specifically as regards regulatory intrusion on efficient communication and simple processes such as the issuing of prescriptions. I know that the Minister and Government are looking at that, but it seems to me, from what I have heard, that more progress can be made. That could have significant benefit in broadening the ways in which people can access primary care.

Customer service attitudes and procedures, particularly post covid, created widely different outcomes between practices. This was one of my two most significant findings. It really matters how the practice manager and the receptionist interact with the patients when they arrive or when they get through on the phone. It is interesting how some practices have done a fantastic job and some have fallen short—there is such a wide variety. I wondered whether there was training and protocols about that human interaction, to ensure that standards were kept up. A similar thing—this is the other thing that is most important—is phone systems. Who would have thought that a GP’s choice of phone system would be a critical factor in patient satisfaction with the service that they get? In my own constituency, there is one particular practice whose choice of system A rather than system B has created for it an enormously larger problem with its patients than other practices have.

The rate of population growth in North East Bedfordshire has been so high for so long, and I am afraid to report that I believe that the NHS has failed to keep pace with regard to the modernisation of premises, particularly ones that bring individual practices together. This will be my final and key point as part of my asks of the Minister. The slow pace of NHS performance has been further frustrated by inefficiencies of section 106 and community infrastructure levy payments. That is most vividly highlighted in my constituency by the plans for a new surgery to serve the villages of Biddenham and Bromham. The land was promised years ago, all the houses have been built and yet the building of the new practice has not begun. That is a crucial “infrastructure first” test case for the future.

North East Bedfordshire is already near to the top of ratios, and population growth at three times the national average means that, without action, the situation will get worse. I ask the Department to look at North East Bedfordshire as a test case for our manifesto commitment on “infrastructure first”; to go back over the past eight years, to identify lessons learned from the inability to keep pace in personnel, processes and facilities; and to map out what could have been done and what could now be done to improve the situation. I am asking for a specific test for my constituency for that historical analysis, and I hope the Minister will agree to that today.

Practically speaking, I also ask the Minister to get her Department to look at unblocking the jam on the hospital site in Biggleswade. It appears that Treasury restrictions, which are legitimate but causing a problem here, are blocking the transfer of facilities so that it can provide GP services in one of the fastest growing towns in my constituency. I have spoken with Central Bedfordshire Council, which is willing to fund the rebuild, but it needs more reassurance and flexibility on long-term

use. Will the Minister please talk with her Treasury colleagues to enable progress, as that would be a vital element in relieving the strain?

There are similar issues at Great Barford surgery, which is still located in cramped facilities. Right across the road there is an available facility, which everyone knows is the right one and has been talked about for years. I ask the Minister to look at that issue and see whether it has to be resolved locally, between the council and the local clinical commissioning group, or whether the Department can assist. In closing, I am grateful to our GPs, who have worked, sometimes with hostility from their patients, exceptionally hard in my constituency in difficult circumstances. I am very grateful to them and their staff.

11.18 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) for securing the debate and raising important points about the good work that is happening, as well as the substantial issues facing his GPs and constituents. I will not stand here and pretend everything is rosy: I want to work with him to address a number of the issues that he raised.

I start by thanking GPs, general practices and primary care for all their work during the pandemic, and for the work they are doing now, increasing their workload, such as dealing with people on elective waiting lists who need care because they are not able to get procedures done as quickly as normal, or helping with the covid vaccination booster. They are dealing with almost a tsunami of patients who are now coming forward to seek help, after we advised them to stay away and protect the NHS during the covid pandemic. We are seeing almost 11,000 cancer referrals a day, for example, and each one comes through a GP. On average, there are 1.6 million appointments nationally per working day, which is an increase of 5.3% on April last year, and 62.5 million covid vaccinations have been delivered by general practices.

That gives the scale of the work that has gone on, but I do recognise some of the issues raised. To reassure my hon. Friend, GPs—whether they are salaried or partners—are generally not directly employed by the NHS. They are independent practitioners who have a business of their own and have a contract to deliver NHS care. Some of those historical arrangements limit the interventions we can make, and some GPs want more integration than others—we have to be flexible in the support that we give.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire is quite right to identify the issue of telephone access. I know from my own constituents that getting through to the GP is half the battle; once they have got through they usually have a positive experience seeing the GP, or other healthcare professional in primary care. We tried to help with this in autumn last year with the winter access fund. Part of that help meant that practices could bid for funding to introduce cloud-based telephony systems, which can transform the way that appointments can be made. My hon. Friend highlighted systems where GPs can see how many people are waiting on the line

and how long they have been waiting for, and can divert resources to get calls answered quicker, even doing so remotely, with receptionists not having to work directly in the surgery to answer the phone, book appointments or organise prescriptions.

Cloud-based telephony is really transforming access to GPs. Unfortunately, some GPs are already signed up to contracts with other telephone providers that they cannot get out of, and some have signed up with other cloud-based telephony systems that are not as good as others, as my hon. Friend pointed out. NHS Improvement is working with GPs to drive full adoption of cloud-based telephony across the system. We are working with surgeries and sharing best practice of what really works. He is quite right that when patients are frustrated about not being able to get through they take it out on staff and GPs. To deal with the telephone access issue and make it easier to get through will transform the lives of both patients and staff.

We must also bust the myth around the 48-hour appointment model, which was in place under previous Governments, where patients had to be given an appointment within 48 hours. Patients had to phone up every morning and could only get an appointment within that 48-hour window. There is no need for that, and we are trying to say to GP practices that that is a historical model—they do not need to stick to it. Very often, a patient will be happy with an appointment next week, rather than having to phone up on the Tuesday, the Wednesday and the Thursday but still not get an appointment. There is a lot of work around practice management, and the systems in individual practices, that we are happy to help GPs with.

We are also working on the pharmacy consultation service, which has been used very successfully during the pandemic. If a patient phones 111, or the GP practice, there is a range of minor ailments that a pharmacy can deal with face-to-face, quickly and expertly. Those ailments, which range from sprains to colds and flu—even those patients with long-term conditions and on long-term medications, such as some diabetics or those with high blood pressure—can be well managed by a pharmacist. We want to go further with that and introduce more services provided by community pharmacists. We are in negotiations with pharmacy teams to see if we can do that. Scotland and Wales have a pharmacy-first system that works extraordinarily well; we are keen that patients in England have access to similar support.

We are introducing changes to the GP contract this year—some of those are more popular than others. For patients, one of the key elements is about extending opening times to evenings and Saturday mornings, to make it easier for patients to be able to see their GP if they need to. That comes on top of the point that my hon. Friend made about other healthcare professionals working in primary care. Primary care is changing dramatically. We have already recruited over 18,000 additional primary care professionals, such as nurses, physios, pharmacists and paramedics, who are often better placed than the GP to provide the care and support a patient needs. My hon. Friend is quite right that there is sometimes a reluctance from patients—a feeling that they are being palmed off on someone else rather than seeing the GP. However, we are finding that once they have seen the paramedic or the physio, they

are very pleased to see that professional the next time an appointment is offered. We are hoping that the take up of that will improve.

We have a commitment to recruit 26,000 more healthcare professionals by 2023-24 in addition to the GPs. We are on track to meet that, so that primary care becomes a multidisciplinary experience for patients, and it is not always the GP who they need to see first. However, as my hon. Friend says, we do need more GPs, and a record number of 4,000 doctors have taken up GP training posts this year, which is a real boost to the numbers, but I recognise that they will take several years to be trained and to come through.

Although my hon. Friend speaks well about the pressure on whole-time equivalents, his local clinical commissioning group allows GP registrars to see patients, which boosts patient appointments and capacity in the local area. He will be pleased to note on housing—again, my constituency in the south-east has similar problems, where housing developments are in their thousands rather than their hundreds and spring up overnight with no consultation with the local GP, who then has to take those patients on—that I am meeting the Housing Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), this month to discuss the very issues my hon. Friend raises about primary care being a key feature during planning and when things such as section 106 and community infrastructure levy money is being allocated. As he rightly says, the health centres need to be built first before the housing.

**Richard Fuller:** I am delighted that the Minister is taking such an active interest in the impact of development on access to services. In my speech, I requested that, ahead of my meeting with the Secretary of State, the Department look back at that history in my constituency as a test case to see what could have been done differently and what might be done now. Will she commit to that being done ahead of my meeting with the Secretary of State?

**Maria Caulfield:** I am not sure when my hon. Friend's meeting is—I think it is fairly soon.

**Richard Fuller:** July.

**Maria Caulfield:** It is in July. We can certainly look at that, because we need to look at the lessons learned if we are to make progress going forward. The Housing Minister is keen to address this problem, so it is good to look at what has not happened in the past that should have, so we can take that forward. I cannot commit 100% to that being ready for my hon. Friend's meeting, but we can certainly look at it.

The final point was on the GP partner model and support for GPs in their role and in some of the challenges they face, whether that is taking on premises or taking on liability. There is definitely a trend where partnership numbers are going down, but salaried GP numbers are going up. That is because younger GPs coming forward often do not want to take on the responsibility of being a partner and everything that entails, but partners feel that being bought into the practice gives them a huge amount of additional investment in terms of time and finance, as well as guidance, development and support for patients.

[Maria Caulfield]

The Secretary of State has instigated the Fuller review—that is not my hon. Friend, obviously, but a GP—around the future models of GP practice, and whether that is partnership or salaried or whether there are different models available. We will take a good look at those recommendations because there may not be a one-size-fits-all solution. Some partners have a definite view of where they want to go; others are struggling and need support and help. I do not think it will be that one size fits all, but the Fuller review will certainly make some strong recommendations.

I hope in the short time we have had that I have been able to acknowledge the main challenges my hon. Friend's constituents and GPs are facing and have outlined some of the measures we are taking to support primary care and enable patients to see their GPs more quickly and easily, whether that is virtually or face to face.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.30 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Neighbourhood Plans

[Ms NUSRAT GHANI in the Chair]

2.30 pm

**Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of neighbourhood plans in national planning policy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your leadership today, Ms Ghani. I thank the staff in Westminster Hall and colleagues who have come to speak in this important debate.

The public often do not think about planning as imperative to their lives, but it is something that happens to them all the time, whether they are conscious of it or not. People are usually only conscious of planning when it is pressed on top of them, and that is an important principle for us to think about. At the heart of this 90-minute debate is neighbourhood plans, which give local people the chance to take control of how they see development in their area. I think it would be useful to set out where neighbourhood plans came from, the problems with them and, most importantly, their future.

If we look at the history of neighbourhood plans, we see that the Localism Act 2011 allowed them to be brought forward. That Act allowed parishes and neighbourhood forums to develop neighbourhood development plans and neighbourhood orders. Neighbourhood plans were about the use and development of land, and they would contain a vision, aims, planning policies and proposals to improve the area, provide new facilities or allocate key sites for specific development, with a possible focus on social, economic and environmental issues. Neighbourhood development orders were for parish or town councils, or neighbourhood forums, to grant planning permission for certain kinds of development within a specific area. This was all held together with the legal framework—section 116 of the 2011 Act—that brought into effect schedule 9 to that Act and inserted into the Town and County Planning Act 1990 schedules 10 and 11.

The main object of neighbourhood plans was to guide and shape development in a particular area around national policies, while conforming to local strategic policies. Changes in the Housing and Planning Act 2016 and in the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 sought to simplify and speed up neighbourhood planning processes, and allowed for greater intervention by the Secretary of State in the process of making neighbourhood plans. Further still, in the Housing and Planning Act 2016, local planning authorities were required to make both neighbourhood development plans and neighbourhood development orders

“as soon as reasonably practicable after the referendum is held”.

There was a further update in the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017, allowing neighbourhood plans to be modified and dealt with in situations where a plan is needed but covering slightly different geographical areas from the previous one. Finally, changes to the national planning policy framework in 2018 mean that neighbourhood plan policies for the supply of housing should not be considered out of date if the plan is less than two years old.

That is a little bit of background about neighbourhood plans and where they are at, but it is worth giving an overview of the process of getting a neighbourhood plan up to date. Draft plans and orders must pass an independent check and then be put to a local referendum.

If there is a majority vote in favour, the local planning authority must adapt that plan, subject to legal compatibility.

The LPA has a statutory role to support neighbourhood planning, such as by undertaking independent examination of the neighbourhood plan, and it runs neighbourhood planning referendums. The Government state that neighbourhood planning should not be a way to block necessary developments. Neighbourhood plans should support the strategic needs set out in the local plan, and they cannot promote less development than is set out in said local plan.

Neighbourhood plans can allocate sites additional to those set out in the local plan and propose sites different from those in the local plan, in discussion with the LPA. The plan can identify areas for protection, such as open spaces valued by the community or green spaces that meet local green space criteria.

That is where we have come from and, broadly speaking, it is a great approach to take forward. I think most in the House would agree that the principles enshrined in this legislation are moving in the right direction, but what is the reality we are living with at the moment? It is fair to say that neighbourhood plans are not for everyone, nor should they be. Communities should want to come forward to design and shape the planning of their community—in essence, the shape and feel of what they have.

In my area of Bosworth, many groups have come forward by choice to make a difference and take responsibility for their local planning area. A second reason for doing so is necessity, because the system is failing. There are no protections, because we do not have an up-to-date local plan. Let me explain what we are living with at the moment. I have two tiers of council: a county council and a borough council. The borough council is responsible for the local plan, but the county council intersects with the infrastructure and the signing off of that plan, and this is all done through the framework of national planning.

Planning is a very difficult issue for an MP. The most common issue in my inbox is inappropriate development in my area. At the same time, people ask me to step in and make changes to individual planning applications. We all know that an MP cannot do that. Without an up-to-date local plan, it is open season in my area. It is a desirable place to live, set perfectly in the heart of the UK. Quite literally, we have the middle of England in my constituency. We have beautiful rural countryside and we are close to the city of Leicester, so the area has a lot to offer. The problem is that with a piecemeal approach to planning, we have huge problems to solve with infrastructure and providing the amenities and services we need.

Across the House, we all agree that nationally we need more houses, but that message seems to have been lost locally, with the Liberal Democrats saying that the issue is the Government's agenda of putting in 300,000 houses. However, in the "Access to Affordable Housing" section of their 2019 manifesto, the Liberal Democrats state that they will:

"Build at least 100,000 homes for social rent each year and ensure that total housebuilding increases to 300,000 each year."

**James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point about the Liberal Democrats and the fuss they make about all this. Is it not disappointing that no Liberal Democrat Member has chosen to come to this extremely important debate on the subject?

**Dr Evans:** My hon. Friend aptly points that out, and I am glad that it will be recorded in *Hansard* for anyone who may come across this debate.

**Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that there is somebody from the Opposition who has come to support today's debate, and to show Labour's position on supporting planning and ensuring that it is affordable?

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** I would point out that you have just arrived in the Chamber. You have made an intervention straight away; are you going to be speaking later on?

**Taiwo Owatemi:** No.

**Dr Evans:** I am hugely grateful to the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) for pointing that out. I believe that my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) was referring to the Liberal Democrats, who I quoted in my speech. It is fantastic to see a Labour counterpart here to take part in this debate. This issue is important to all our communities, no matter which party we represent, and I am eternally grateful to her for being here to hear what we have to say.

I raised the point I was making because of the essence of our housing system. We need the right houses in the right place, with the right infrastructure and the right protections for our heritage and environment. We need houses that families can aspire to. In my area, more importantly, we need houses that the elderly generation can downsize to. We are struggling with both of those, not just in my area, but across the country. If we do not get this right, we risk losing our vibrant, rural aspects to suburban sprawl, with no thought given to where it should be. Piecemeal development does not help anyone—from schools to infrastructure and amenities, such as doctors surgeries—when we know that the country is under pressure.

How do we take this forward? Neighbourhood plans are a good way to help. This is where national policy intersects with localism, and rightly so. In my constituency, I have vanguard neighbourhood plans, such as in Market Bosworth, which has led the way for years in developing its plans. Various other areas, such as Markfield, Stoke Golding and Burbage, are all at different stages of working their way through their neighbourhood plans.

I am eternally grateful to the councils and individual constituents who have taken the time to go through what is, at times, a laborious, technical and painstaking process to try to get a result. What infuriates them more than anything else is that this has been ridden roughshod over because we do not have an up-to-date local plan. We must find a way to try to strength neighbourhood plans. In answer to the question:

"Can a Neighbourhood Plan come forward before an up-to-date Local Plan is in place?"

the House of Commons Library states:

"Where a neighbourhood plan is brought forward before an up-to-date Local Plan is in place the qualifying body and the local planning authority should discuss and aim to agree the relationship between policies in...the emerging neighbourhood plan...the emerging Local Plan...the adopted development plan...with appropriate regard to national policy and guidance".

[Dr Luke Evans]

There is a framework there, but I question what that looks like in reality.

If only there were a legislative vehicle coming forward that could make a change. Well, it just so happens, as the eagle-eyed among us will have seen, that a Bill is being introduced tomorrow that will try to pull together and streamline 70 years of a fragmented planning system. I am pleased to see that this is taking place. There is lots to like in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill: simplification, design codes, choices opening up for developers and stopping land banking. Many of these matters go far wider than today's debate, but there are five guiding principles. Hon. Members who have heard me speak on planning may argue about the acronym with the Secretary of State, but I will not be going there today.

The aim of the Bill is to support local communities to have control over what is built, where it is built and what it looks like, and to create an incentive for developments to meet set standards, with the aim of developing high-quality design and beautiful places and to protect our heritage. The Bill will enable the right infrastructure to come forward where it is needed, enable local democracy and engagement, foster better environmental outcomes and allow neighbourhoods to shape their surroundings, because that is where the impact of planning is most immediately felt. The last point is really important, and it is why I have called the debate.

In among those details, the Bill says that local plans will be given more weight when making decisions on applications, and the same weight will be given to other parts of development plans, including neighbourhood plans prepared by local communities. There will be opportunities for communities and interested parties to influence and comment on the emerging plans, which will be supported by digitalisation to ensure plans and data are accessible and understood easily. It will ensure that neighbourhood plans are given weight in planning decisions and in the development of neighbourhood priorities, with a statement to be taken into account when preparing the local plan.

Additional parts of the Bill state that neighbourhood plans will focus on development and use of land that contributes to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change. That is done through a neighbourhood priority statement, which will set out the prevailing view of the community in a neighbourhood area on local matters including development, housing, the natural environment, the economy, public space, infrastructure, facilities and services in the area.

This is the prime evolution of where we are going with localism and neighbourhood plans, and I am pleased to see it. I would be more pleased if the Minister addressed some of the areas I have mentioned and talked about what the system will look like. We need to ensure that when it is working well, it runs at its full potential. Even more so, we need to know what it means for a community such as mine when the system starts to fall apart.

In closing, we have seen where the evolution of neighbourhood plans has come from. I have touched a little on the problems that we face when things do not go quite to plan—pardon the pun. Of course, we have opportunity for the future. I think we can all agree, yet again, that we need the right houses in the right place,

with the right infrastructure, and the right protections for our heritage and environment. I would be grateful for the Minister's response.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** I call Sir James Gray.

2.45 pm

**James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con):** I am most grateful to you for your chairmanship, Ms Ghani, and for promoting me. I am, in fact, just Mr James Gray at this stage, though you never know; it might be in the post. It is most kind of you, none the less.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** I withdraw my Sir from the record.

**James Gray:** It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. My congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) on securing the debate, and on explaining what is often an abstruse, complicated and difficult area, in the clearest and most sensible terms. The way he framed his speech was extremely useful, and it will be well read up and down the country by local authorities and others who are considering neighbourhood planning.

I agree with my hon. Friend that planning should be about how many houses and where. I would add “and when”, because the timing of development is extremely important. I am a strong supporter of neighbourhood planning, and I had the great luck to be here in 2011 when the Localism Act was one of the first to be passed by the coalition Government.

We brought in neighbourhood planning, because we felt that decisions about planning should be given to the lowest possible level. We thought that local people should be allowed to decide what houses they want, where and when, as well as what the rest of the neighbourhood should look like. I am glad that Malmesbury in my constituency was one of the first places to spend an enormous amount of time and effort on bringing forward a neighbourhood plan. It is a very good document that works extremely well, and many other places around the country have based their neighbourhood plans on the Malmesbury example.

Neighbourhood planning is a great idea that I strongly favour, but I have three little reservations, which the Minister might be able to answer in his wind-up. Alternatively, he might be able to include some of these notions in the amendments that are no doubt coming forward to the Levelling up and Regeneration Bill, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth said, starts its progress through Parliament tomorrow.

My first reservation is that in neighbourhood planning, there is a presumption in favour of expansion. It is not possible for any neighbourhood to say, “We like it precisely as it is today. We want no more houses. We do not want any change. We would like it to stay as it is.” No matter how beautiful, how perfect or how remote the neighbourhood may be, the neighbourhood plan, by definition, presumes that there will be growth.

The neighbourhood plan people go around and have the following conversation with people in their houses. “How many children have you got? Would you like them to remain in the village?” “Oh, yes, I would.” “Are there any houses?” “No, there are not, because in this village every house costs £1 million, and there are no houses for them at all.” “Oh, jolly good. Three children;



that's three more houses for this village." The neighbourhood plan writes into itself a presumption in favour of growth. In some places, that makes sense. If there is a way to bring in low-cost housing for local people, that is much to be desired.

None the less, the principle of looking simply at the number of children under 10 in the village and working out from that how many houses will be needed in 20 years' time is totally flawed. Like it or not, our children tend to go off to the nearest big town or city and will not remain in a remote little rural village. The houses built on that presumption tend to be three, four or five-bedroom houses for executives who come in from elsewhere. It is no longer about low-cost housing for local people. It becomes an unreasonable development of that area. That is my first reservation: neighbourhood planning presumes growth in the number of houses, and I think that is wrong.

My second reservation is perhaps easier to deal with, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth touched on it briefly. Under revisions that were made to legislation in 2018 or 2019, the Government brought in the stipulation that the neighbourhood plan is valid for only two years. That might have seemed a good idea at the time, but it takes about two years to develop a neighbourhood plan. By the time it comes to the consideration of a big planning application of the kind that we see across Wiltshire at the moment, the neighbourhood plan is out of date. There is no point in having it if two years later we say, "It is no longer an important document." All of the thousands of person hours put into creating a neighbourhood plan in the first place are, by that means, wasted. We should look again at the stipulation of a two-year limit on the validity of a neighbourhood plan. We could perhaps reverse it and say that the neighbourhood plan will be valid unless local people ask for it to be changed, and that it remains valid not for all time but perhaps with a 20 or 30-year limit, so that by and large the neighbourhood plan becomes the rule.

My third reservation about neighbourhood planning is slightly more complicated, but I will take the example of my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth and try to make this as straightforward as I possibly can. It is a consistent problem in Wiltshire. The five-year housing land supply figures that are used in considering whether an application should be allowed are based on the completion of estates in the area. In other words, if the planning inspector is worried about it and Wiltshire Council is correctly concerned so it turns down an application for a big development, the inspector will then look at the five-year housing land supply figure, which I will come back to in a second, and almost inevitably find in favour of the developer. There is a big presumption in favour of the developer under those conditions. That of course means that Wiltshire Council lands up paying the barristers' fees, which can often be substantial.

Unsurprisingly, officers have been correctly saying, "We must be very careful as councillors. We must not allow you to turn something down if we believe you will then lose at appeal." That is where, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth says, the local and the national intertwine in the person of the planning inspector, who considers the rules under the national planning policy framework, and by and large they tend to favour the developer.

I mentioned in passing the notion of the five-year housing land supply figure. This is a complex area of the law, but the law states that the local authority is required under the local plan to make available enough housing land that is readily developable for five years. If that figure is based, as I understand it is, on completions—estates that are completed—we are by definition writing into the law a presumption that the developer will not complete it. We see that all the time in Wiltshire. Developers go out of their way not to complete the development, not to provide the primary school that was part of the section 106 agreement, and not to complete the number of houses. By that means they can say that the development has got 500 houses, that it is not complete, and therefore it does not form part of the five-year housing land supply. That means Wiltshire Council has consistently got 4.6 years and 4.8 years rather than five years, and that means the inspector will then always say, "The developer has it. The developer will get it because Wiltshire has not completed the five-year housing land supply figure."

The situation is unfair because we have written into the system a presumption in favour of developers not doing what they ought to be doing and completing the estate. A simple change would correct that: instead of the figure being based on completions in an area, it could be based on planning permission granted on land. If every time a developer who had a completable application granted said, "I am going to build 500 houses on that piece of land there and I can demonstrate it can be done", that should count against the five-year housing land supply, which would then mean that Wiltshire, for example, would have something like a six-year housing land supply and therefore local people could decide where and when they wanted the housing.

At the moment, the neighbourhood plan is a worthless piece of paper. All that happens is that local people say, "We want housing there and there", but an inspector says, "I am very sorry. With the five-year housing land supply, your neighbourhood plan is a waste of time. It is a worthless piece of paper and I am going to overrule you. And not only that; I am going to give you £100,000-worth of barristers' fees against the council tax payer", and of course the council does not want to do that.

Now is the time to change, probably under the new Bill. The Minister might like to consider very carefully this question of the five-year housing land supply, detailed as it may seem. I may be proved wrong—I am no expert in these matters—but there is a straightforward and simple way of correcting things. Instead of the five-year housing land supply being based on completions, it could be based on developable planning permissions granted.

I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth for calling this excellent debate. It is a terribly important time. We have to supply houses for our people. The Conservative Government's plan to provide 300,000 houses—if I remember rightly—is extremely good, and we have to find a way of doing that. We have a great problem with homelessness and the lack of housing. The question, though, is where those houses should be and when they should be built.

At the moment, the planning system does not take account of local interests and beliefs and neighbourhood planning. It takes account of nationally set targets, which tend to trump the wishes of local people. I very

[James Gray]

much hope that during the passage of the Bill, which will start tomorrow, the Government will consider some of these detailed points and change the Bill in such a way as to ensure that the interests of local people are looked after when we decide how many houses will be built and when and where.

2.55 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Ms Ghani. It is a pleasure to be called and to follow the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray). His contribution was full of personal experience and knowledge. His input to this debate, for *Hansard* and for the Minister, in particular, is one that cannot be ignored. I say that in all honesty because there is a depth of knowledge in his speech and we should all take note.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) on securing the debate. Although the subject is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, I try on all occasions to come to Westminster Hall to support those who have secured debates and to add a Northern Ireland perspective. I have had a particular interest in planning for umpteen years. I served on Ards Borough Council for some 26 years. I started in 1985—a long time ago. Planning was one of the major issues, so I have a real, deep interest in planning matters. That is why, when I saw that the hon. Member for Bosworth had been granted this debate, I wanted to come along and make a contribution.

From the outset of this debate, it is clear that our differing planning systems mean differing strategies. However, underpinning our planning systems is the fact that we move with the times and build in our expectations. I have worked on planning over the years, both as a councillor in a previous life and in the Northern Ireland Assembly, where we were responsible for some planning matters, although planning is devolved in its entirety to the councils. I think the hon. Member for Bosworth referred to the two stages of planning—local and county level—but in Northern Ireland, the councils control all of that: the local part and the strategic part, ensuring that the development is done in the right way.

I chair the healthy homes and buildings all-party parliamentary group. In my capacity as chair, I understand the need for people to have better homes. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire is correct: the Government have the responsibility to provide homes. This Government have made a commitment to build homes, which is something I support. I support that back home, as well. Very often, we are given a choice betwixt a rock and a hard place, because developments and houses are needed. I will give some figures in relation to that later on. The APPG focuses on the need to build modern, efficient homes, with amenities included, where access to schools and GP surgeries is in place and the road structure is there. That is all part of it.

Back home—I suspect it is not any different over here—when it comes to developments, there will be a big input from the developer. When it comes to building roads, the developer will not be seeking help from the road services—back home, the input and responsibility for the roads is on the developer. If it has to set aside provisions for amenities, such as playgrounds, the responsibility will be on the developer. The council will agree the plans and the structure, but it will not agree

when it comes to spending money. The developer will be responsible. That is why the input from the developer is so critical, and why it has to be in partnership and co-ordination with local councils as well.

I am very blessed—I say this often, and I mean it—to represent what I believe is the most beautiful part of the United Kingdom. With rolling green fields, crashing waves, tranquil scenic beauties and wonderful historic sights, that is Strangford. Anyone who wants to come and visit is very welcome to do so. Anyone who wants to come and visit is very welcome to do so. I am sure other Members will say that their constituencies are equally beautiful, but I love mine.

However, with that beauty comes a lot of responsibility, and our planners often err on the side of caution when it comes to approvals. While I agree with that in areas of outstanding natural beauty, as is the case where I live in the middle of Strangford, when we have sites on the periphery of towns it makes sense to design and create all-purpose neighbourhoods. That is the whole point of this debate and that is why I agree with the thrust of what the hon. Member for Bosworth was putting forward.

New developments, by their very nature, put pressure on facilities, so it is important that that is sewn into that structure and strategy early on. I recently spoke in this place about difficulties GP practices were having in expanding to provide a holistic approach. This morning, the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) referred to access to GPs, saying that in his constituency GPs had 500 or 600 patients more than the national average. He was clearly illustrating, from his point of view, that there was a need to have a certain level of GP access.

Having clinicians, nutritionists, mental health teams and physiotherapists in one place is what GP surgeries need to be. It is such a straightforward issue, because with full coverage comes less pressure on hospitals and better provision, yet none of this is a material planning consideration. The hon. Member for Bosworth says it should be, and I agree wholeheartedly.

Neighbourhood planning is the answer, and that is why this debate is important. I am not surprised that Government research from 2015, using a small sample of neighbourhood plans, suggested that areas with a plan in place saw a 10% increase in housing allocations over that provided by the local plan. That is an indication of where we are. The always helpful Library briefing highlighted that research

“by planning consultancy firm Turley from 2014 found that more than half of the draft plans published for consultation had ‘protectionist’ agendas and that many were openly anti-development.”

I would not adopt that attitude; I think it is important that people have an opportunity to buy an affordable house, perhaps where they were brought up. The possibility of someone's children buying a house in a village where the hon. Member for North Wiltshire said houses were in the higher bracket of close to £1 million would mean they would never get one. This is about affordable housing and how to achieve it.

It seems that the Northern Ireland problem is, in fact, a UK-wide problem as well. What the hon. Gentleman and others have referred to is not unique to the UK mainland; we also struggle with it in Northern Ireland. I long for the days when sensible planning comes into play and when developers do not have to spend tens of

thousands on the application process, which could be spent on ensuring play parks within developments and units for GPs or pharmacies and other such essential and desirable community facilities.

Through my time as a councillor and an alderman, I am aware that the council did not have early control over all development issues and planning applications. That was done by the road service and a different planning department in Downpatrick. Then, whenever the reorganisation of the council took place, after my time, planning in its entirety fell on the shoulders of local planners. In my past life, I was able to have a monthly meeting with local planners and have a frank discussion on the applications, which I found incredibly helpful and which developed my knowledge of the process. The planning officer would have said to me on a regular basis that a planning application could not go through or another would not work, so it was then about finding a solution.

Life is all about solutions, and this is about trying to find a medium between what is achievable and what people will settle for. I accepted the planning officers' conclusions because I thought that, ultimately, the responsibility lay with them. If they changed this or that, we could work with that, or if we thought we could do something differently, we used to be able to discuss and find a way forward. I long for those days again. They will not happen, because I am no longer in the council and therefore my input into those processes is from a different level as an MP. I would love to work alongside a department that would seek a way forward and not automatically refuse.

The waiting list for priority, affordable housing in my council area—just in my main town—stands at 3,000. There is a big onus on us, back home, to perhaps look at how we can provide social and affordable housing. We must get that sustainable, affordable housing in place, and working with developers and local communities is the only way to achieve that.

That is why this debate is important, and why the input from the hon. Member for North Wiltshire is so important. It adds knowledge to this debate, which I think helps to formulate a strategy. It is fortunate that the Bill is coming to the Chamber tomorrow—this is a preview of tomorrow. I am pleased that the Government, I think, have grasped this one. I hope that the strategy is one that works. I will watch it from afar because I hope that we can replicate it, in a way, and do something similar for Northern Ireland.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** Thank you, Mr Shannon—a vital contribution, as always. I call Mr Anthony Mangnall.

3.06 pm

**Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con):** Thank you, Ms Ghani. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, and it is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). As others have done, I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans). He is well known in this place for being rather good at self-promotion, not least through TikTok. He has campaigned on several important issues, not least on body imagery, but he has once again brought to the forefront an important topic, which, while dry and often perceived as quite dull, he has

managed to make interesting. To reference his own speech, he has given a speech at the right time, in the right place on the right topic, and I do not think that any of us will be disagreeing with the contents of his speech.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** Order. Mr Mangnall, I believe, for the record, that the Minister will consider his portfolio to have always been interesting.

**Anthony Mangnall:** I beg your pardon, Ms Ghani. However, of course, this is a matter that we are now allowed to discuss, both today and ahead of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill tomorrow. This is an important point, because we, as Members of Parliament, are sent to this place on the back of our constituents and we engage with them on a regular basis through our surgeries. I suspect that I speak on behalf of all Members in this room when I say that planning, neighbourhood plans and development are things that continually drop into our mailbags or inboxes. It is of the utmost importance that, while in many scenarios, we are not able to engage quite as much as we would like, we now have the perfect opportunity to give them the voice to be able to stand up for what they care about.

As has already been mentioned, the Localism Act 2011 gave communities the power—the voice—to speak up for what they want in their local area. You may call me old fashioned, Ms Ghani—or perhaps not—but I am one of those old-fashioned Members of Parliament who happens to believe that decisions are made better in local areas by empowered local communities, and in the idea that Westminster and Whitehall do not know better on the needs of my towns and villages than my parish councils, my neighbourhood plan conveners, and my local council in some instances. It is that concept that I want to speak about in this debate.

The Localism Act created the hunger, the drive and the determination for every single member of the community to be able to speak up for what they wanted in their area, to ensure that they could have the right buildings in the right places, designed in the right way, and that the infrastructure would be in place and their community needs would be met. We have that opportunity tomorrow, in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, I hope. I think it is worth pointing out that the Bill does enforce and enhance certain aspects of the neighbourhood plans.

I have gone through the Bill and I am looking forward to debating it with the Minister and the Secretary of State tomorrow. However, in clause 88, we have a strong opportunity to look at how we can write into law, from the Localism Act, the way in which we can strengthen those neighbourhood plans. That will allow us to allocate land for development and to detail infrastructure, affordable housing and design requirements. Those are three of the many other options that are to be included in the Bill tomorrow, and they are to be welcomed, because we need to set the standard we expect for neighbourhood plans, to make sure there is commonality but also a unique perspective from every neighbourhood plan, so that people are able to present what they want in their area.

But—there is always a “but” in these instances—the problem is that there needs to be support to help neighbourhood plans to come together and be written. All too often, a neighbourhood plan is put together and the small mistakes made by volunteers, who are working

[Anthony Mangnall]

incredibly hard, are exploited by the developers—something I shall come to in a second. If there is to be support, it has to be centrally provided and not come from local authorities. We must put the responsibility on central Government to help provide that support, rather than adding to the workload of local authorities. Indeed, a perfect example of how we are encouraging and enhancing local communities' power and the strength of their voice is through street votes. As I mentioned to the Secretary of State before the debate, it is no good having a placeholder amendment in the Bill for street votes. We need more detail to make sure that we can reassure colleagues, as well as constituents, about this matter.

The challenges are many, but I will stick to just a couple. The first is around neighbourhood plans versus the Planning Inspectorate. These plans are hard to create. We have all spent time reading neighbourhood plans, and we have all gone through them with our communities and villages. We have seen our communities hold referendums on these matters, and we know how hard they work. Recently in my constituency, Dartmouth and Strete have both had referendums, and they have produced genuinely high-quality neighbourhood plans. Volunteers worked tirelessly to produce those plans in the first instance, but it does not strike me as particularly effective to encourage people to produce neighbourhood plans if those are just thrown out after the first challenge from a developer or local authority, or if the Planning Inspectorate ignores what is in those plans.

We have to think hard about how we provide support for neighbourhood plans in the future, so that people cannot be bullied and downtrodden by developers with expensive barristers, or by planning inspectorates that end up listening to the person who is paid £500 an hour rather than the local volunteers, who are doing it out of charity for their community. I have gone in front of the Planning Inspectorate on no fewer than three occasions to try to stand up for local communities. Sadly, I am not a barrister being paid £500 an hour—[*Interruption.*] It could happen, I suspect. However, I did the best I could to stand up for my communities and what they wanted to see. We need to make sure that neighbourhood plans are ringfenced and secure, and that where support is necessary, we can provide legal advice against planning inspectorates in certain circumstances. It is a modern-day David and Goliath story—one that I think the Minister understands and that the Secretary of State certainly understands, and one that we can address in the Bill tomorrow.

How we support neighbourhood plans has to change, and my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire said that we must find the balance and retain that important local voice. I have already cited the fact that we have had good referendums on two neighbourhood plans in my constituency, but there are two further examples, in the form of Collaton St Mary and Inglewood, where communities put together fantastic local plans. They understood what the affordable housing level would be, where the infrastructure would go and how the houses would be built—only for those plans to be completely overridden and their views ignored. Eventually it got to the Planning Inspectorate, and the decisions went against them. I hope the Minister will give me an answer, because I do not know what to say to them

when they come to see me and say, “We put all this effort and hard work into a neighbourhood plan, in the expectation that we would be listened to, that this was us stamping our mark on our village and community and that we would get what we want. We are not nimby. For that matter, we are not BANANAs”—which means build absolutely nothing anywhere near anybody—“We are people who want to build houses so that people can live in our area, work in our area and have primary residences.” They are now deeply upset and have lost faith in the system.

**Taiwo Owatemi:** The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about ensuring that residents are empowered and listened to with regard to local plans. In my constituency, areas such as Eastern Green, Holbrooks and Allesley are feeling very frustrated by the fact that every time they bring up suggestions about the local plan, developers are listened to rather than them. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that we prioritise the views and needs of local people over those of developers?

**Anthony Mangnall:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. That is exactly the point: localism is about local communities having a local voice and deciding what they want in their area. I do not think any of us in this place would disagree that we want local communities to retain that strength of voice—that strength of community—that allows them to make decisions for themselves. That is what I believe conservatism should be about, and the hon. Lady is always welcome to join the Government side of the House if she subscribes to it in such a manner. As I was saying, we have to make sure that development plans are shaped locally, and that when neighbourhood plans come into contention with developers, those plans are able to be robust and rigorous.

I will make two more quick points before I sit down. Clause 83 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill—I am probably making some of the arguments that I will make again tomorrow—deals with the question of development plans versus the national development plan. We are asking local communities to come up with development plans, but telling them that when they come into contention, the national development plan will override theirs.

I am deeply unhappy that the national development plan has not even been published. Tomorrow, we have the Second Reading of that important Bill—a Bill that will be watched by all our constituents—and we are faced with the fact that documentation has not been published. I have been reassured that a lot of this documentation will come forward when the Bill is in Committee, but I urge the Government to act with a little more urgency and to expedite the publication of this document, because my constituents view this as an enormous power grab. They are saying, “We will produce our local development plans, but if the Government do not like them or if a contention is raised at any point during the development of those plans, they can be overridden by a central body.” If I am wrong, the Minister will steer me in the right direction, but I ask for details on that specific point to be provided as soon as possible. The Secretary of State must not have the ability to override local plans, because that will kill people's faith in the system. We need to have the opportunity to amend this in Committee, and not simply have a

Cttee of Government-appointed members. I am happy to volunteer myself, although I am not entirely sure that the Government will be taking me up on that offer.

When introducing the planning Bill, the Secretary of State used the acronym BIDEN, meaning we would build beautifully, we would build with infrastructure in mind, we would hold developers to account, we would take the environment into account and we would have neighbourhood plans. Having travelled across my constituency, engaging with local groups, parish councils and those who have produced neighbourhood plans, I can assure Members that those people like that acronym. They want to see it written into the Bill; they want to be reassured that the Secretary of State's words are not just words but text in the Bill that we will debate tomorrow, and that that Bill will reform a planning system that has been found wanting for the past 32 years. We have the opportunity to achieve that reform now, and the Secretary of State has the opportunity to prove that he is good not just at rhetoric, but at passing pieces of legislation.

The hon. Member for Strangford may well have misled the House in saying that his constituency is the most beautiful. I am sure we would all disagree and would make the same argument for our own constituencies.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** Mr Mangnall, can we be careful when we suggest that colleagues may be misleading the House?

**Anthony Mangnall:** I retract that, of course. I have been to Strangford, and it is a very beautiful constituency; I am not sure it is the most beautiful, but Members would not expect me to say anything else. However, the hon. Gentleman was absolutely right that we need sensible planning.

If I may, I will conclude with a few points. First, when we debate the Bill tomorrow, we must ensure that its policy is “brownfield sites first”. There are 21,000 hectares of brownfield land across the United Kingdom, which could accommodate 1.3 million houses. Some 2,100 acres of that land are owned by publicly owned organisations, and we could accommodate 125,000 houses on it. That is perhaps something for us to think about. Secondly, we must ensure that infrastructure is there first, so that we are building with a local community—doctors, schools, roads, sewerage networks—in place before development even starts. Thirdly, developers must be held to account. Finally, and above all, we must make sure that we listen to our local communities.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** From BIDEN, to BANANAs, to volunteering to sit on a Committee—the Minister is spoilt for choice.

3.19 pm

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): As always, Ms Ghani, it is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair. As others have said, this is not only an important debate but a timely one, given the recent introduction of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and its Second Reading tomorrow. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) on securing the debate, and I commend him on his considered opening remarks. I also thank the hon. Members for North Wiltshire (James Gray), for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for their contributions.

In opening the debate, the hon. Member for Bosworth made a strong case for the importance of neighbourhood plans to his constituents in Leicestershire, the need for greater clarity around neighbourhood plans and the need for such plans to be accorded more weight in national planning policy. Opposition Members are very much in agreement with the thrust of his argument, although I take issue slightly with his wider remarks about unregulated development and development without the necessary infrastructure, which he spoke of as if they were materialising from the void, as if by magic, rather than as a consequence of successive Conservative Governments being determined to liberalise the planning system in a way that is causing extremely damaging development across large parts of the country. That issue aside, we have heard from all the speakers today about the benefits of neighbourhood planning.

Introduced in 2011 under the Localism Act as a formal part of the development framework, neighbourhood planning gives communities a greater say in where future development takes place, how it is designed and what infrastructure is provided with it. To the extent that it enables communities to better shape development in any given area, neighbourhood planning can—as we have heard, this is by no means always the case—increase public engagement, reduce the number of objections to planning applications and boost housing supply over and above local authority targets.

A detailed University of Reading report from May 2020 concluded that the contribution of neighbourhood plans to housing supply—as a result, essentially, of spatial planning by allocation—could be significant, that such plans have helped in many cases to improve design policy and refine local priorities, and that they have had an influential role in planning decisions in many parts of the country. There is also evidence that they have provided a means for particular communities to mitigate the impact of acute housing pressures in their localities. To take just one example—an issue that we have debated more than once in recent months—neighbourhood plans have proven to be a means of assisting coastal and rural communities to better control excessive rates of second-home ownership and the marked growth of holiday lets, although the Government still need to do much more to properly bear down on the problems arising from those trends.

In praising the concept of neighbourhood planning, I do not intend to imply that it is problem free. Opposition Members have genuine concerns about the take-up of neighbourhood plans, in the sense that all the evidence suggests that the vast majority of the 1,061 neighbourhood plans made to date emanate from more affluent parts of the country, where people have the time and resources to prepare and implement them, rather than from less affluent areas and more complex urban environments. We also have concerns about the fact that their policy content, in terms of addressing critical issues such as climate change, has been highly variable. Those concerns aside, we continue to support the principle of neighbourhood planning.

The more fundamental issue with neighbourhood plans—somewhat ironically, given the title of today's debate on the Order Paper—is that, as things stand, it is not entirely clear what role they play in national planning policy.

**Anthony Mangnall:** Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that clause 88 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill makes the point that neighbourhood plans will take into consideration climate change and environmental aspects?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I do recognise that and I will come to the Bill specifically later in my remarks. It does provide some useful clarity about neighbourhood plans, although there are far more serious defects when it comes to them, but I will come to that shortly.

As I was saying, I do not think it is clear, as things stand, what role neighbourhood plans play in national planning policy. They are explicitly addressed in the national planning policy framework, but only in terms of process and—as people will see if they read the relevant sections—in such a convoluted manner that I would not be surprised if even professional planners struggle with what the guidance means in practice. On one hand, the stated rationale of neighbourhood plans is that they give communities the power to develop a shared vision for their area, and because they are legally part of development plans, they do provide for a statutory say in what goes where. On the other hand, they must conform to local plan housing allocations and have regard to national planning policy and they can be overturned when they are in conflict with either. The resulting tension, the root of which is ultimately the question of who decides—communities or Ministers—remains largely unresolved.

What I would argue is lacking but is sorely needed is greater clarity about the precise remit of neighbourhood plans. More fundamentally, we need a better sense of the function of neighbourhood planning within the wider planning system. Ultimately, we will have to move toward a planning system based on a clear and easily understood settlement—one that ensures that communities that wish to proactively shape development in their area cannot stymie the meeting of local housing need, while also preventing central Government from unduly stipulating how that need is met on the ground in any given area. That balance is critical, and it is balance that is required, but we believe that that balance has still not properly been struck. That is largely because the default reaction of successive Conservative Governments when confronting the tension that exists between local planning and national planning has been to seek to disempower communities and further horde control at the centre.

Several hon. Members spoke about the great play that earlier Conservative-led Governments made of neighbourhood planning, and it is absolutely true that the coalition Government made great play of it and of localism more generally in their early years. However, since that Administration, successive Conservative Administrations have spent much of the past 10 years ineptly tinkering with the planning system in ways that have systematically undermined the scope for effective local and neighbourhood planning. Far from seeking to remedy that error or to take forward a localism agenda—as the hon. Member for Bosworth, who introduced the debate, argued—the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill doubles down on it.

The hon. Gentleman did not explicitly mention this, although the hon. Member for Totnes did, but the new national development managing policies that the Bill provides for will take precedence over both local and neighbourhood plans where there is a conflict between

them “to any extent”—the Bill is very clear about that. In addition, the requirements to consult on any new NDMP are entirely at the discretion of the Secretary of State and, unlike with national policy statements, there is no parliamentary approval process.

I just ask Members to consider for a moment what that would mean in practice if the Bill goes through unamended. Those powers would allow a Minister of whatever political allegiance to develop an NDMP encompassing literally any policy designated by them as relating to development or use of land in England, to determine not to consult on that policy and then to use it to overrule any local development plan in conflict with it at the stroke of a pen. Is it any wonder that organisations such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England are warning that if this power is enacted it will stifle local innovation on issues such as affordable housing, energy efficiency and nature conservation, undercut local democratic engagement in and scrutiny of the planning process, and lead to significant delays where conflict between local plans and national policies is contested?

The hon. Member for Totnes was absolutely right when he spoke about the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill as an opportunity. We have an opportunity to reform planning policy in England in a way that empowers local communities. Instead, my fear is that the Bill as drafted is likely only to further erode the legitimacy of the planning system in the public’s eyes by downgrading the status and the scope of local planning. The Government must amend the Bill to ensure that communities are still able to participate effectively in every aspect of development plan formulation, and to make it crystal clear—I think this is the point that the hon. Gentleman was making earlier—that NDMPs can only be used to overrule local and neighbourhood plans in relation to nationally significant issues.

When the Minister responds, I hope we hear from him that he appreciates the concerns that have been expressed about the ways in which the Bill undermines localism in the planning system, and that he is willing to think again about those clauses in the Bill that would undermine local and neighbourhood plans specifically. More widely, I look forward to hearing his thoughts about how the Government might provide greater clarity about the future remit and function of neighbourhood plans and in particular—this point was well made earlier—about what can be done to encourage their uptake by communities, particularly those facing the greatest social, economic or environmental challenges?

3.28 pm

**The Minister for Housing (Stuart Andrew):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Ms Ghani.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) on securing this very important debate, and I also congratulate all hon. Members who have taken part and given their own experiences, from their own constituencies, about the importance of neighbourhood planning. My hon. Friend has been and remains a tireless champion of both neighbourhood plans and neighbourhood planning in his contributions to debates and in much of his extensive correspondence with me as a Minister. He has been consistent in advocating for a more democratic and locally led planning system. Perhaps unlike other Westminster Hall debates, this might be one of those rare occasions on which the Minister

responding on behalf of the Government agrees almost entirely with all hon. Members' contributions. I certainly hope that my comments today will reassure him and other hon. Members that the Government are committed to putting communities at the very heart of our planning system, with neighbourhood plans playing a crucial role in that area.

Before I say more about how we are working to make that vision a reality, I should say to hon. Members that I am, of course, unable to comment on specific cases due to my quasi-judicial role in the planning system. However, I can talk in general terms about many of the issues that have been raised in today's debate. At the outset, let me say that the Government believe that neighbourhood planning offers a powerful set of tools for local people to shape development in their area—development that meets their community's needs, from protecting green spaces and local heritage right down to the design and characteristics of new homes.

As hon. Members will know, these plans continue to have real statutory weight in planning decisions. Once made, they form part of the development plan for the local area alongside the local plan, and they become the starting point for decisions on individual planning applications. In fact, the national planning policy framework makes it clear that where a planning application conflicts with an up-to-date neighbourhood plan, permission should not usually be granted. It is important to stress that the framework affords certain neighbourhood plans additional protections if the local planning authority cannot demonstrate a five-year land supply of deliverable housing sites—something that I know my hon. Friend has identified as a serious cause of concern for residents in his own constituency. These additional protections kick in where plans are under two years old, meet their identified housing requirement and other conditions are met.

Local planning authorities play an important role in this process too. They must provide advice and assistance to neighbourhood planning groups when producing their plans and take decisions at key stages. Planning legislation and policy also makes it clear that emerging neighbourhood plans can be afforded weight in decision making, particularly when they are at an advanced stage of preparation. I am delighted to say that many communities have taken up the opportunity to prepare a neighbourhood plan since the policy was first introduced. Over 2,800 groups have started the process since 2012, and over 1,300 plans are now in place across the country. As I understand it, there are no fewer than six in my hon. Friend's constituency of Bosworth.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my admiration for the communities that have taken the time to prepare these neighbourhood plans, bringing local people together to shape development in a way that meets their needs. There are some brilliant examples of this work all over the country. The Bridport area plan in Dorset, for example, covers four parish councils and is located entirely in a designated area of outstanding natural beauty. The councils are working in partnership there to make sure that high-quality design goes into every affordable home that is built, so that they are indistinguishable from the available houses on the open market.

**Anthony Mangnall:** I apologise for interrupting the Minister. He is giving an excellent speech, including very robust answers to some of the issues we raised. The

policy document that was introduced alongside the Bill talks about scrapping the five-year land supply for local authorities that have up-to-date local plans. Can the Minister confirm, either tomorrow or in future in Committee, that that will actually be within the legislation—in black and white in statute?

**Stuart Andrew:** My hon. Friend is right. One of the big issues I have seen in my own constituency, and during my time in this role, arises when councils do not have a local plan in place—and even if they do in some instances. If they do not have the five-year land supply, there is speculative development that happens all over the place, and it pits communities against any sort of housing development. We are making it very clear in the Bill—and supporting documents will be published alongside it—that where an area has an up-to-date local plan, there is no need for it to prove that it has a five-year land supply to stop that speculative development happening.

**James Gray:** I very much welcome that stipulation in the Bill. However, will the Minister consider one of the problems that I suspect may arise, namely that if we give notice to developers that that clause is coming into effect in a year's time, or that the local plan might well take a few more months or a year to complete, in the meantime there might be a deluge of speculative developments that we cannot stop, until such time as the law has become an Act?

**Stuart Andrew:** My hon. Friend made that point in a conversation we had the other day. It is a valid point and one that I am taking back to the Department to double-check that we have all that in place, because it is important.

I mentioned the neighbourhood plan in Dorset, but closer to home in London, in Newham, is the Greater Carpenters neighbourhood plan. That post-war estate is seeking to develop and reoccupy existing empty homes. The policy emphasises affordability, prioritising low-cost family-sized homes and homes for older and disabled people. It is a textbook example of community-backed sustainable development. We want more areas to follow that lead, so we have put in place £40 million of funding up until 2023 to ensure that residents have the tools and resources that they need to get their plans in place.

In many ways, therefore, neighbourhood planning has been a great success story, but the Government and I want to encourage more communities to become involved and have a real say in what is built locally and where. That is why the Bill that has been mentioned on many occasions today includes the important role that neighbourhood plans will continue to play in the planning system. It makes it clear that communities will be able to continue allocating sites for housing, protecting green spaces and local assets, and setting design requirements for new developments through their plans. Crucially, the Bill will strengthen the role of neighbourhood plans in decision making. Planning application decisions will only be able to depart from plans if there are strong reasons to do so.

Neighbourhood planning is widespread, but—I take the point made by the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook)—take-up is uneven across the country. In some areas, usually in towns and cities, there is little neighbourhood planning activity.

[Stuart Andrew]

We recognise that some communities have faced challenges in getting a neighbourhood plan in place, and we want to ensure that all areas can become involved.

Through the Bill, we will introduce neighbourhood priority statements—a new additional tool to provide a simpler, faster and more accessible way for communities to participate in neighbourhood planning and to shape development in their local areas. The statements can be prepared by neighbourhood planning groups and can be used to set out the community's priorities and preferences for their local area, on everything from the new facilities that they need to the buildings and green spaces that they want to be protected. In fact, we anticipate that in some areas the statements might also act as a springboard for preparing a full neighbourhood plan, a design code or other community initiatives outside the planning system. Councils will be required to consider statements when they prepare their own local plans, meaning that neighbourhood priorities cannot be brushed aside easily; statements have to be treated as formal input. Taken together, we are confident that the reforms will further cement—forgive the pun—the role of neighbourhood planning in the system. Perhaps more importantly, that will provide communities with more opportunity to influence development right on their doorstep.

I will turn to a couple of the points made by Members. I want to make it clear that I am a huge fan of neighbourhood planning. I am fortunate enough to have a parish council and a town council—in Rawdon and Horsforth, respectively—as well as a group of volunteers in Aireborough, developing neighbourhood planning. I have seen at first hand the enormous amount of time that they put into developing the plans.

In the first few weeks of doing this role, I was keen to do a roundtable with neighbourhood planning groups around the country. It was useful to listen to their experiences. We have taken on board a lot of what they said and we are looking at how we can make further improvements. Among a number of the points made today, however, was the argument that where such planning is locally driven, we often see more houses built. I was particularly struck by a council official, I think from Herefordshire, saying that because the council had invested in and supported neighbourhood planning, it had ended up seeing more houses built than it could possibly have achieved as a council. I would like to see that happen elsewhere.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth was right when he said that too often planning is something that people feel happens to them, and we have to change that. That is why, in the Bill, we want to make local plan making easier so that more people can engage and can do so digitally and not to have go through hundreds of PDFs and complicated documents. He is right that it is about building the right houses in the right places. That will get public support for house building and stop the problems that we have seen. He is right to have mentioned the BIDEN principles, which really do stand for many of the things that we want to see, and he was completely right to raise the issue of older people's housing too. We will soon establish a taskforce to look into that so that we provide our older generation with a choice of housing—not just one type of housing—so that we can help them downsize if they want to. They will not be forced to.

**James Gray:** Does the Minister agree that there is one other area that needs to be looked at, particularly in the area of older people's housing—namely, better use of the stock that we have? There are at this moment 800,000 empty houses in the United Kingdom. We must find a way of making better use of them. Many of those empty houses are old people's houses that they have inherited or perhaps moved out of. It seems they do not know what to do with them. Can we find a way of writing into the Bill some means by which we can make better use of the existing stock?

**Stuart Andrew:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not just about building new homes, but making sure there is efficient use of the stock that we have, and there are measures in the Bill to try to encourage the use of empty homes.

The two-year validity of a plan was raised at the roundtable. Again, it is something that we are looking at. I have mentioned the issue of the five-year land supply. The issue of local housing need figures is also something that we are trying to resolve as quickly as possible.

I love the fact that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) comes to each of these debates to give a Northern Ireland perspective, which is particularly helpful on this matter. I remember a few people scratching their heads in a debate when I was talking about HS2. I thought, “If I can't even get it to Leeds, how are we going to get it to Northern Ireland?”, but there we go. He was right to talk about areas of outstanding natural beauty and protections for them. Neighbourhood planning could be more imaginative about the sites that could be developed. I have seen that in my own community where people are really very clever. He was also right to talk about the provision of infrastructure. That is why the “I” in BIDEN is so important. The levy that we are introducing will capture more of the land value so that there is more money for the local community.

One thing that I have certainly picked up is that we need better engagement between local planning development and the provision of health services so that they all come at the same time. People are frustrated when they see the houses and years later, if ever, the infrastructure that is needed to support them comes down the line. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) was right to say that local people know best. The design standards that we are putting in the Bill will be a key feature for many local communities, and new developments will complement the local area.

On development management policy, I know that people are concerned, but it is not meant to override a local plan, which has supremacy because it is the local plan. However, there is an enormous amount of duplication in the development of local plans—for example, protections for the green belt, heritage sites and so on. Many local authorities are not confident that there is enough weight in the current system, so the policy is to try to stop that duplication and make sure we have protections in place. Again, I have listened to colleagues' concerns and we are actively looking at many of the points that have been made.

**Anthony Mangnall:** I accept the Minister's response, but the explanatory notes and the text of the Bill talk about what happens in the event of a conflict between a



local plan and a national plan. What does he envisage the conflict will be in a scenario where it may override a domestic plan?

**Stuart Andrew:** It would not be possible to set land uses through national development policy. No housing will ever be built on sensitive sites if the local authority opposes it because of any of the NDM policies. I hope I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance, but I have heard his points and will come back to him.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth for securing today's important debate, and I am grateful for the opportunity to reiterate the Government's commitment to putting local communities in the driving seat of a simpler, smoother and more inclusive planning system. I should add that many of the measures we have set out in the Bill, such as neighbourhood priority statements, will be honed and refined as we put the legislation on the statute book. I speak not just for myself, but for all my ministerial colleagues, when I say that we are committed to working closely with hon. Members in all parts of the House to make sure we get these reforms right and delivered on the ground, and that they deliver the improvements we all want to see and help us to fulfil our pledge to level up communities right across the country.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** It would be remiss of me not to mention how important this debate is to my constituents in Wealden as well.

3.46 pm

**Dr Luke Evans:** I thank the staff for their attendance today, and the Chair for her wise intervention. This has been an interesting debate about planning, and I am hugely grateful to all the speakers. If my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) is not a knight after his speech, he definitely should be; it was a huge bible of information, but I would particularly like to pick up on the issue of the five-year housing land supply, which the Minister addressed. His point was that the key thing is building out: once approval is given, it should be built out to make sure it is taken forward.

It was fantastic to hear about the experience of the hon. Member for Strangford, in Northern Ireland (Jim Shannon). I am not going to shame him by saying that I was born in 1983; I think he said 1985, so 26 years' worth of experience means that I have a lot to learn. In his speech, he hit on the nub of what we are talking about today, which is better homes. That is a really important point to take away and deal with, and I will return to it in my closing remarks, because it brings together the issues of access, all the problems that we have, and the potential solutions for building better lives for people.

I do not think anyone has called my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) a BANANA before, but maybe today will set a precedent. Given his hunger, his voice, and his tireless energy in bringing forward this debate, his constituents are very lucky to have him as their representative, and he emphasised something that is really important: support for those who want to be enabled to deal with planning. I am grateful to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), for his comments, but he is right that take-up is not as high as it should be. Dealing with planning is complicated, difficult and daunting, so we should encourage and support people going through that process. I am pleased to hear the Minister say that that is exactly what he intends to do.

I very much welcome the Minister's closing comments. When he said, "I agree with everything", I was hoping that he would conclude at that point, but alas, we had a few more minutes to go. However, I am grateful that the Government are listening, and are keen on taking this issue forward proactively; after all, we are not talking about houses, but about homes. Homes are where we live, and we live in neighbourhoods. If we keep that in mind, we will not go far wrong.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the role of neighbourhood plans in national planning policy.

3.49 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Ports (Forth and Clyde)

[MS NUSRAT GHANI *in the Chair*]

4.5 pm

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** I will call Kenny MacAskill to move the motion and I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

**Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered regulation of ports and maximising economic and maritime potential on the Forth and the Clyde.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. As post-Brexit chaos has all too vividly shown, ports are a vital part of a nation's infrastructure. Scottish and UK exports have been hindered and harmed by Brexit itself, but also by blockage at key ports. Commercial harbours are fundamental for trade and the health of the economy. Indeed, the UK Government even sought to reopen a port as the crisis loomed and at significant cost—albeit failure. Meanwhile, Ireland has seen ferry and container services to the continent greatly increase, allowing for both outbound exports and inbound tourism. Scotland, though, remains devoid of even one direct ferry service to Europe. There have been past debates about that issue and the continued problem, so today I wish to focus my remarks on another aspect of maritime policy, one that equally constrains Scottish economic growth and the potential for Scottish tourism. It is related and inextricably linked, as ferries and ships ply their trade and take their goods to harbours. The issue is port ownership and regulation.

Ports were privatised in 1992, and that lies at the heart of the problem and remains a serious concern for Scotland today. Hence, although transport is largely devolved and much to do with ports and harbours rests within the domain of the Scottish Government, a debate in this Parliament remains hugely relevant and, indeed, vital. As well as being caused by the UK Government's actions in privatisation, it also affects their current reserved powers, as it has created a monopoly situation, which I believe is harmful to local needs and to Scotland's national interests. Trust in municipal ports still exists and they mostly perform well for their communities. I have many in my constituency and others, such as Aberdeen, can be even bigger. However, there are critical areas in Scotland where what should be municipal, indeed national, assets are instead owned and operated for private profit, and where the wants of other communities and even countries dominate.

Scotland has many estuaries, but industrialisation and population have ensured that the two most critical are the firths of Forth and Clyde. They teem with people and businesses, as well as being redolent of Scottish history. They are vital for access, not just to the east and west coasts of Britain but for trade beyond with Europe, America and the rest of the world. Who owns them and what effect does that have on our nation?

Let me start on the east coast. I was born in Leith, for long the principal port on the Forth, if not in Scotland, until trade moved west. Nowadays, I can see the river from my flat in Dunbar and therefore know the estuary

well. Ask anyone in either of those communities or, indeed, anywhere on the banks on the river who owns Forth Ports and they will say perhaps the council or the Scottish Government or maybe even a wealthy Scottish industrialist. But no, they would be wrong and they would be gobsmacked to know that Forth Ports is owned by the Public Sector Pension Investment Board, a Canadian Crown corporation.

The fundamental duty of that organisation is to maximise revenue for the pensions of Canadian public sector workers, current or retired—a laudable aim that I do not criticise in the least, as they are no doubt pensions well earned through hard work and endeavour. However, the duty of the Canadian Public Sector Pension Investment Board is not to ensure the maximisation of the port asset for the local community, let alone ensure the growth of the Scottish economy. No wonder many residents in Leith and even some employees view it more as a property developer than as a port operator, or that Forth Ports sees the construction of a wharf allowing cruise liners to dock as being the responsibility of the Scottish Government, rather than its own, despite the name and ownership of the asset. That is how it is: it is not Canadian pensioners to blame but port policy, or the lack of it, in Scotland and the UK.

It gets worse. Not only is Forth Ports owned by the equivalent of an absentee landlord—Scotland knows how harmful they can be—it is worsened by other ports that Forth Ports plc owns and operates. Forth Ports becomes the equivalent of a branch factory and, once again, Scotland knows how harmful that position is.

Who is Forth Ports plc? For sure, it owns Grangemouth, which is Scotland's principal container port, as well as the ports of Leith, Rosyth, Methil and Burntisland, the other major ports on the Forth. It also owns the port of Dundee on the Firth of Tay, the next firth or estuary up the coast. All fine and well, one might think, but it is what else it owns and operates, despite the name Forth Ports plc, which causes a conflict of interest. It also owns and operates the Port of Tilbury, which is part of the Port of London, situated on the River Thames, not the River Forth or any firth in Scotland.

We might ask, "So what?" But it is when we realise, not just where ownership lies, but where the major source of operation is sited that the problem appears. Tilbury carries more traffic than all the Scottish ports combined. Forth Ports corporate website last year indicated that 16 million tonnes of cargo went out of Tilbury, but only 9 million from Grangemouth, which is by far the largest Scottish port. Tilbury, as well as dominating in trade, dominates in passenger numbers. The cruise liner turnaround hub at Rosyth, mentioned on the corporate website, is dwarfed by the London international cruise terminal boasted of at Tilbury on the same corporate site.

In a nutshell, what does that mean? It means that what should be Scotland's major east coast port area is owned for the benefit of pensioners across the Atlantic, and where the strategic focus of management is on the Thames not the Forth. The interests of the Forth in Scotland are swamped by those of a Canadian pension fund and a competitor estuary. That is the issue on Scotland's east coast but what is it like on the west?

The west coast remains vital to Scotland, even if much focus has once again returned to the North sea and away from the Atlantic. It is rooted in the Scottish psyche and soul, from the tears of emigration, through

ships that were built and sailed the world, to songs still loved and sung today. The Clyde remains Scotland's largest urban concentration, still has a manufacturing base, provides world-class food and drink exports and possesses scenic sights that many round the world long to visit—the basis for a vibrant port, or even ports, one would think.

The major ports on the river Clyde—Glasgow, Greenock and Hunterston—as well as Ardrossan down the Ayrshire coast, are owned and operated by Clydeport, but since 2003, ownership of them has moved from the firth, as with the Forth. Ask a resident on the Clyde who owns the major harbours on the river, and a similar response of government, local or national, or a local worthy, will be forthcoming. But now the owners of the major harbours on the River Clyde are Peel Ports plc, part of Peel Properties, one of the largest property investment companies in the UK.

Peel Ports is based in Manchester and the majority shareholder is John Whittaker, a billionaire who lives on the Isle of Man. Again reflecting the situation on the east coast and the River Forth, the interests are not those of the local communities or even the nation's economy. Instead, as well as owning other harbours, which I will come to shortly, it has an extensive property portfolio, including John Lennon airport in Liverpool and the Manchester Ship Canal. It also owns Cammell Laird shipyard and Tranmere oil terminal on the Mersey.

I have nothing against any of those operations and wish them well. I have no doubt they try to do the best for their workforce and customers, but their interests are not similar to the interests, and certainly not the needs, of the Clyde or Scotland. Moreover, the principal beneficiaries are not Clyde communities or the Scottish economy. Instead, it is for the benefit of a Manchester-based company and an Isle of Man billionaire.

Once again, as with the Forth, the situation of ownership is worsened by the operation of the ports by what in many instances should be competitor harbours. So much for the free market extolling and liberating competition. Peel Ports plc also owns the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, which in turn operates the port of Liverpool. Indeed, it also owns Heysham, Great Yarmouth and London Medway, and described the last as its “flagship port”.

It is not just in praise from the principal owners where the Clyde loses out in trade. In terms of tonnage of trade, according to Department for Transport data for 2020, the Mersey dominates with 31 million tonnes in and out; Medway has 9 million tonnes, leaving the Clyde trailing in their wake at under 7 million tonnes. As with the Forth, ownership and operation of the Clyde have neither the local community nor the national interest at their heart or as their focus.

There are additional issues in the Clyde that worsen those conflicts of interest. While they could also arise on the Forth given the circumstances, they are certainly live on the Clyde. First, as a consequence of harbour ownership, Peel Ports is in charge of Inchgreen dock in Greenock. That dock is potentially critical to reviving shipbuilding on the Clyde and to securing the future of the last remaining yard on the lower Clyde, Ferguson Marine in Port Glasgow. There are other issues there with ownership and construction of ferries that I do not have time to go into: the wrong ferries ordered, incompetence by the procurement agency CMAL and rush and failure by the Scottish Government.

What remains clear is that Scottish island communities have a desperate need for new vessels, and Ferguson Marine is the yard to build them. When work is required and an industrial future sought, it is there, not Turkey, where orders should go. Moreover, the workforce has not just the history but the current skills to build them. In doing so, and given the needs of island communities, future expansion may well be needed. That is where Inchgreen dock comes in. Rather than ensuring it can be used for shipyard expansion, Peel Ports has sought to lease it as a breakers yard. The skilled jobs are fewer and the work less profitable.

In any event, the breakers yard has not opened yet. Would that have anything to do with Peel Ports plc also owning Cammell Laird shipyard on the Mersey, which competes with Ferguson for orders? It is not just Turkish ports competing for orders; Cammell Laird also wants orders that should be going to Ferguson Marine on the Clyde. It certainly does not look right. Where is the free market competition so extolled by this Government when the interests of a Clyde shipyard, as well as those of Clyde communities and the Scottish economy, are drowned by those of the Mersey?

Dredging is an additional issue following privatisation. Clydeport, as with Forth Ports, has become the statutory harbour authority, and is therefore responsible for dredging in the river. But on the Clyde there has been no recent dredging upstream beyond the BAE Systems site. Govan docks has recently been taken over, and the new owners have ambitious plans. How can they ensure that dredging takes place when it is carried out by a rival port owner, and one who may have no interest whatever in its success?

Ports are critical to our communities and our economy. Key harbours and estuaries are vital for trade, tourism and employment. Yet in Scotland, the two major firths have owners whose interests are not those of the local communities or, indeed, the nation, and whose operations actually conflict with the needs and wants of the Forth and the Clyde. There is no way that Canada would allow the port of Montreal to be owned by New York or that the USA would allow Los Angeles to be run by Vancouver. Neither Belfast nor Dublin would benefit by being run by the other. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that the island of Ireland's two major ports are thriving—they are municipally or nationally owned and focus on their own national interests, not those of someone else.

This unhealthy monopoly is damaging Scottish interests. It should be broken up, with the Government seeking action from the Competition and Markets Authority to ensure Scotland's interests are both protected and promoted. If not, compulsory purchase or the creation of new ports should be pursued by the Scottish Government. The Forth and the Clyde cannot be drowned by the interests of the Thames and the Mersey.

4.20 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for, I believe, the first time, Ms Ghani—a very great honour. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) on securing the debate, although I take issue with the rather gloomy picture he paints of ports and the wider maritime sector in Scotland. I shall address why I take a different view in a moment.

[Iain Stewart]

Ports are the heartbeat of our global goods exports. We expect that global maritime trade volumes could treble by 2050 and we will be ready to play our part, including by reforming our ports regulations to ensure we support our ports to continue to grow and excel in a competitive global environment. The economic opportunities in the maritime sector are huge, including driving up exports and creating high-paying jobs across the country, with specific benefit to coastal communities.

The goal is for the UK to cement its already strong position and thrive as a world-leading maritime nation at the cutting edge of technology, innovation and maritime services, underpinned by effective, responsive and best-in-class regulation. Our policies on levelling up, building back better and our transition to net zero are crucial to gain the economic benefits for our ports and increase the prosperity of our country. Those policies provide successful examples of the engagement between the Government and the private sector. It is encouraging to see how successful Scottish businesses, ports and academic institutions have been in the recent clean maritime demonstration competition—a clear signal of Scotland's drive and ambition to innovate.

I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's assertion that there is somehow a conflict of interest in the owners of Forth and Clyde ports also owning other ports in the UK. One thing we are keen to see is the extension of—a very difficult phrase to say—short sea shipping. Do not say that in a hurry.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** I would say to the Minister that, as the previous maritime Minister, all those words used to flow quite easily for me. He may continue.

**Iain Stewart:** I am very grateful for your sage advice, Ms Ghani. The transportation of goods around the UK shoreline will be an increasingly important part of transport connectivity in this country.

I would also point to the investments that are being made to increase our port capacity. The hon. Member for East Lothian may be aware that, as part of the Glasgow city deal programme, considerable investment will go into Greenock to upgrade the ocean liner facilities and make sure that the port remains a key destination for international and domestic cruises.

The hon. Gentleman touched on shipbuilding in Scotland, which is renowned for its rich shipbuilding heritage, spanning centuries. It remains the location of a significant proportion of the UK's shipbuilding capacity. The refreshed national shipbuilding strategy, published in March, was an important milestone for the industry. Scotland will benefit from the Government's shipbuilding spend—£4 billion across the UK over the next three years—and the renewed focus on this industry. The shipbuilding pipeline in the strategy provides industry with certainty and a clear setting out of the Government's policy and procurement ambitions. Looking at the Royal Navy alone, in the short term for Scotland, the shipbuilding pipeline sees eight Type 26 frigates being built by BAE Systems on the Clyde, sustaining some 1,700 jobs, and five Type 31 frigates being built at Rosyth by Babcock, supporting around 1,250 jobs. There are of course many other opportunities for Scottish shipyards and suppliers, and this clarity on the Government's future requirements should provide confidence for industry's

order books. It should also create enough volume to encourage industry to invest in facilities, infrastructure and innovation, which will bring ever-increasing rewards.

The refresh is wider than defence; it is about systems and subsystems, ports, offshore wind and more. By broadening the scope of the strategy, more companies across Scotland will benefit. The focus on improving skills should be welcomed, as this is an area where we all recognise the importance of getting it right. We fully support the ongoing engagement between Whitehall and the devolved Administrations on how to make a meaningful difference in the area, which will ensure that the initiatives already under way, including with local universities and apprenticeships, can thrive.

Alongside the refresh, the Maritime Capability Campaign Office, which unites the defence export and civil maritime capabilities in one unit, will help to build on Scotland's export success in military ships and designs. It will champion exports and investments, unlocking opportunities for our world-class shipbuilding industry to export its innovative technologies, services and designs around the globe. The export variant classes of the Type 26 and Type 31 have already been successfully marketed and sold overseas, including to Australia, Canada, Indonesia and Poland.

The hon. Member for East Lothian tempted me to go down the path of commenting on the Ferguson Marine shipyard. I will resist the temptation to make political points, but it is one area where we might agree on the analysis of the situation.

Let me turn specifically to port regulation. The Government are currently consulting on the repeal of the EU port services regulation and associated statutory instruments. This retained law was designed and implemented with EU public sector ports in mind. It is the Government's view that the provisions in the PSR are sufficiently covered in the UK by commercial practice within the framework of domestic law. Now that we have left the EU, we have the opportunity to review the regulation and to consider what is appropriate for the highly competitive UK ports sector, and I look forward to seeing the outcomes of that consultation this summer.

One area of UK-wide policy that I have not touched on yet, and which will be of enormous benefit in Scotland, is freeports. We are delighted to see the expansion of the freeport programme across the UK. In Scotland, we have seen the landmark agreement between the two Governments on the establishment of two green freeports, with up to £52 million of funding from the UK Government. I cannot go into any specifics at the moment, as there is a competitive process under way, but I am confident that the expansion of the UK freeport scheme in Scotland will bring great benefits, including regeneration of communities, the creation of high-quality jobs and support in the transition to a net zero economy.

In closing, I would like to reflect on the importance of ports to the heritage, economy and people of Scotland. From our historic industrial past to the thriving sector of today, ports have a leading role in the defence of the nation by developing world-class technology and innovation, and providing high-quality jobs. Now we look to the promise of tomorrow and the opportunities to be realised for our workers, for exports, for our communities and for our green future. I think we can all agree that our ports have been, and will continue to be, essential to the fabric of the nation and the success of

the economy. The Government want to ensure that we maximise our capabilities across the sector through effective regulation, innovative practices and a focus on spreading economic benefits to all corners of the United Kingdom.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.29 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Football Index Collapse

4.35 pm

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of the collapse of Football Index.

It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Ms Ghani.

Football Index was a platform that allowed customers to create, buy and sell bets to one another as a means of making money, but it was, or was presented as, so much more than just betting. The “go to market” option on the platform allowed users to buy and trade with one another, creating an exchange market for customers. Due to the nature of the product, from its launch in 2015 it was advertised to customers repeatedly by Football Index as

“the world’s first football stock market”,

leading many to believe that this was more than just simple gambling and that it was a way of using their knowledge of football to grow a portfolio and make money. And on paper, in the early years, some did.

The collapse of Football Index has really damaged many customers. We have only to look at the tip of this iceberg to see stories from individuals who have lost so much as a result of the failings surrounding the company. The issue is more than money, vital though that is. The situation has also had an impact on many customers’ mental health and wellbeing. Despite the report published by Malcolm Sheehan QC in September 2021, there are still many unanswered questions, leaving the thousands of people affected without answers. This must be addressed to ensure that they have the answers they need. We must also, crucially, look again at the regulatory failing that allowed the situation to come about.

**Sir Greg Knight** (East Yorkshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Is she aware that in the previous Session of Parliament there was an early-day motion on this subject? It was tabled on 25 November by the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth), who I see is in his place, and it called on the Government to implement the recommendations of Malcolm Sheehan QC, but it concludes by saying that it

“further calls on the Government to do all that it can to ensure that those owed money receive full reimbursement.”

Does the hon. Lady join me in supporting and repeating that request today?

**Liz Twist:** I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. Certainly this debate is part of the ongoing campaign to ensure that justice is done, and I will touch on the issue of compensation and redress later in my speech.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way on the point about fairness and justice. My constituent, Mr Murphy, lost £7,000 following the collapse of Football Index. Unbelievably, all that he has had back so far is £81, but for him and constituents like him, it is not about the money; it is justice that they want and deserve. He wanted me to say that he said this:

“I want the Directors responsible to be made accountable for their actions...I have seen nothing from the Government in terms of redress for customers or even how something like this can be prevented in the future.”

[Sarah Owen]

Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister needs to tell us how this will be prevented from happening again, and what justice people can expect?

**Liz Twist:** I certainly agree and will touch immediately on the issue of redress. As I was saying, the issues identified must be addressed to ensure that those affected have the answers they need and we must look again at the regulatory failing that allowed this situation to come about. Tens of thousands of customers had—and lost—more than £124 million in the system at the point of its collapse. Of course the question of redress must be revisited, as hon. Members have already said, because the clear failings of the regulations applied to BetIndex Ltd, a subsidiary of Fame Ventures Ltd, have left many people in a difficult position.

The Sheehan report, as we have heard, highlights a range of issues about the regulation of the product; it highlights several failings by both the Gambling Commission and the Financial Conduct Authority. It sets out that from early in the life of Football Index, the product was not regulated correctly and the platform’s “go to market” function was not notified to the Gambling Commission. However, it states that the Gambling Commission had reviewed the product twice and this was not noted in the reviews carried out, meaning that Football Index was given its licence and launched without any consideration of one of its two main features. At that point, it was already clear that the Gambling Commission should have done more to protect the rights of customers. Given Football Index’s likeness to an exchange or a market, the Gambling Commission should have notified the Financial Conduct Authority.

The Sheehan report also states that the Gambling Commission became “fully aware” of the issues with Football Index in 2019, but it still allowed customers to put money into the platform, meaning that customers lost even more money because of the commission’s inaction.

In 2019 the Gambling Commission referred Football Index to the Financial Conduct Authority, and in September that year stated that Football Index should be authorised by both the FCA and the GC. Despite that, again nothing was put in place. Clearly, the failings allowed customers to bet more and more into a platform that was not correctly regulated. Now, in the aftermath, people are having to deal with the fear that they may never get back the money that they put into the platform. The life-changing impact that could have on some individuals is clear.

**Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab) *rose*—

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Streatham) (Lab) *rose*—

**Liz Twist:** I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy).

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for making such a brilliant speech on an issue that has affected so many of our constituents. At the end of last year, I met my constituents who are victims of the Football Index collapse, and they shared with me details about the impact that the collapse has had on them financially. However, what they spoke about in most detail was the emotional impact and the damage

to their mental health. Some felt ashamed or guilty for getting family members to invest and lose money in Football Index as well. Securing redress for the victims of the Football Index collapse is about more than just financial redress; it is also about giving them justice, given the emotional and psychological damage that the whole incident has caused. Does my hon. Friend agree?

**Liz Twist:** I most certainly agree. I know the real impact that the collapse has had on my constituents’ wellbeing—not just financially. My hon. Friend makes a valid point.

**Clive Lewis:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Liz Twist:** I will take one more intervention and then I must make progress.

**Clive Lewis:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and for making such a powerful speech and securing this debate.

I wanted to intervene at this point, when my hon. Friend is talking about the regulatory framework, because it has comprehensively failed my constituents, many of whom have been suicidal. The collapse has led to them losing their homes or their businesses. The FCA failed them, Football Index failed them and the Gambling Commission failed them.

The Government have ruled out financial redress. Would my hon. Friend say that, in the interests of justice—indeed, if justice is to be done—and in the interests of our constituents’ wellbeing, the Government must look at financial redress again?

**Liz Twist:** I most certainly agree. It is one of the asks that I will make of the Minister later. I will try to speed up, because I am aware that so many Members want to speak.

I have made the point about the regulators and the fact that, in effect, Football Index was allowed to operate as a stock market where people traded stocks. I will now talk about the experience of people such as Chris and Collin, who are my constituents. They have given me permission to share their experiences. They told me about the difficulties the collapse has caused in their lives. Chris was saving up for a wedding and now has limitations on what he can afford. He said that Football Index

“was advertised as a great way to invest and buy shares, it was shown to be a better way to save compared to the rates banks offer. The loss of the £13,000 has limited certain aspects of what we can afford now.”

Collin also lost an incredible amount of money through this regulatory failing, which has had a direct impact on his mental health. As a result, he spent months unable to work, because of the stress and depression caused by the collapse. He told me:

“I feel a massive sense of guilt and anger that a huge amount of my family savings has been stolen. That money could have been used for my children’s future, house improvements, holidays and other investments.”

That comment again touches on the issue of regulatory failing. Football Index was able to sell itself as the “football stock market”; the language used was very public and the company even sponsored football teams high up in the Football League system. Allowing customers to believe that was incredibly misleading. The Gambling Commission and the Financial Conduct Authority should

have stepped in long before they did. Their failure to understand a licensed product led to Collin, Chris and many other people across the country losing thousands of pounds.

On 17 May, I wrote to the Minister about the experiences of my constituents, and fortuitously, I received a response to my letter yesterday by email. The Minister noted that the Gambling Commission and the FCA have acted on the recommendations of the Sheehan report, so there is clearly a recognition that there was a failure in the regulation of the product. It is clear that the regulators have failed many people, like Chris and Collin, and they and I believe that they should be compensated in some way for that failure. The Sheehan report itself admits that it was

“produced under significant time constraints”

and could not provide

“as full responses...as possible”

to the issues, yet even from that condensed outline of the issues, it is clear that the regulatory failings have cost thousands of people dearly.

I welcome the gambling White Paper announced by the Government, which will seek to better regulate the market, better protect customers, and learn the lessons of this failure. However, that is simply not enough for the tens of thousands affected by the collapse of Football Index—those who have lost such great amounts of money, who are worried about telling loved ones about lost savings and growing ever more pessimistic about the Government’s handling of the matter. Those people simply want one thing: justice. On a number of occasions, the Government have stepped in when regulators and companies have failed to ensure that people are protected, so my constituents and those of other hon. Members ask, “How is this situation different?”

The Football Index action group has repeatedly asked the Government to do more to seek redress for those affected, and is willing to discuss that request with the Government and work with them to find a solution that will work for the people affected. As such, my first ask is whether the Minister will commit today to a meeting with the Football Index action group and myself to further discuss these outstanding issues.

It is clear that the failings that surrounded Football Index were severe, and the impact they have had on people’s lives will be lifelong. For that reason, those affected deserve the answers they need to move on from the situation. Will the Minister commit to another, more in-depth report, or would he be supportive of an inquiry into those regulatory failings to show that the Government and Parliament support those affected, and want to work with them to find the crucial answers that those people need?

Since the collapse of Football Index in March 2021, the regulatory failings have become clear, and the tens of thousands of people affected have lost huge amounts of money to this scandal. For them, we need to do more than learn the lessons and look forward; we need to find answers, and compensate where possible. My final ask is that the Government look again at bringing forward a redress scheme for the victims of Football Index. My constituents Collin and Chris, who have been hit hard by their losses as a result of regulatory failings, and all the other people affected across the UK, deserve answers and redress.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** Due to the huge interest in the debate, the Minister’s time will be reduced to five minutes; the Opposition spokespersons’ time will be reduced to three minutes; and Back Benchers will have two minutes. My apologies, but that is the only way I can get you all in.

4.48 pm

**Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani, however brutal the time limit may be. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this important debate and setting out the case so clearly—I will not do so again, given the time limits. I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, and let people know that I worked for Bet365 for 15 years before I came to this place. I have long experience of the Gambling Commission, and while I was in that role, it was frequently behind the curve and asleep at the wheel, which is one of the accusations levied at them regarding Football Index. In a period during which the gambling landscape was incredibly innovative, too many firms went bust with ante-post liabilities, too many punters lost money, and there was too little redress for people. Sadly, that is again the case today.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** Order. Mr Bell, because some people have left the room, we have now increased the time limit to three minutes for you.

**Aaron Bell:** That is incredibly kind, Ms Ghani. Thank you very much.

This is a particularly egregious case. Five constituents have written to me about it; I will not name them, because I do not have their permission to do so, but a number of them have lost thousands of pounds. In this case, the Gambling Commission failed to identify the key features of the product, which then changed while Football Index was running it, and the Gambling Commission did not seem to notice. Andrew Rhodes, who I believe is a good man—I will come to that in a bit—said in his response that the Gambling Commission does not believe it licensed a Ponzi scheme. That may not be the case, but he also said,

“BetIndex was not recruiting enough customers to compensate for depleting its financial position”—

as it did by increasing the dividends—

“and ultimately collapsed as a result.”

If such a company is not recruiting enough customers to pay out the ones it already has, that looks like a Ponzi scheme to me.

It is clear that the ultimate blame lies with the operator. We have already heard a call for the directors be held to account, which I absolutely support, but we must be better at protecting people, as a Government and as a state. As I said, I have five constituents involved. I support what the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) said about people wanting restitution and justice as well as compensation.

I am also very concerned that these people are vulnerable in other ways now. Football Index is finished, but there are other online products out there that, in my opinion, share some of the same characteristics. They are attractive to young men, in particular, because they look like

[Aaron Bell]

get-rich-quick schemes. I am thinking of the crypto space and the various coins that are designed to be pumped and dumped. If people get in at the right moment they can make a profit, but if they get in too late they might lose their life savings.

Similarly, there is this ridiculous craze for non-fungible tokens, which, to their eternal shame, many football clubs and sports stars have endorsed. This is completely deplorable. I do not think those are regulated at all. Perhaps we can do something about that through the Online Safety Bill. I know that the Gambling Minister is busy with the Online Safety Bill Committee today, and I welcome his substitute, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), who used to be my Whip.

This situation mostly affects young men. I believe we owe them a duty of care. My five constituents—all young men—believed, because they saw the kitemark, that the Gambling Commission understood, and almost endorsed, the product. Obviously it did not. If we license these sorts of products, then we ought to be standing behind them. We are not standing behind them now, as they are struggling to get any sort of compensation at all, although there is obviously an administration process going on.

I am sure that everyone here will have constituents who have suffered as mine have. We owe it to them to get to the bottom of this and give them some restitution. I will yield my final 20 seconds.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** Beautifully done, Mr Bell.

4.52 pm

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing a debate on a scandal that has caused much hardship. Constituents in Newport East have been among those who lost life-altering sums of money when Football Index collapsed last year. Some £124 million-worth of bets that were placed by customers in full trust with a company that was licensed by a UK regulator have all but disappeared. The scale of this loss is nothing like the sector has seen before. Hon. Members were right to say that individuals have been driven to the brink of suicide, marriages have collapsed, families have been affected, and life savings for weddings, houses and retirements have vanished. Over a year on, they are still dealing with scars on their mental health and finances, which has been reflected to me by constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon was right to stress that Football Index was not an ordinary gambling firm. It modelled itself as an investment package, and in an utter failure of regulation by the Financial Conduct Authority and the Gambling Commission, customers felt wrongly assured that their long-term investments in the index were secure. The Gambling Commission was aware that these investments were more risky than customers thought. The Sheehan review said that it was an “exceptionally dangerous pyramid scheme”. One constituent pointed out that Football Index took in a significant amount of capital at the beginning of the pandemic, and that its aggressive use of capital and

failure to maintain a liability reserve to meet those investment obligations led to the rapid deterioration of the business.

The distinctive nature of Football Index also meant there was confusion, as has been mentioned, as to whether it was a gambling product under the remit of the Gambling Commission or a financial product under the FCA. The fact that there were unresolved discussions between the two authorities about co-regulating Football Index shows that there are still gaps in the framework, which seemingly enticing new business models can fall through. The Government need to iron this out.

There are serious questions for the FCA to answer. It twice stated that the product fell within its regulation, yet seemingly changed its mind. The Government should now look at the feasibility of a compensation scheme for the victims, using the precedent set by the collapse of London Capital & Finance, as well as securing proper redress for those who have lost so much. The Secretary of State should also ensure that the alarming regulatory failings that allowed this to happen are never repeated.

4.54 pm

**Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this debate on such an important issue. It is one that has caused a great deal of suffering.

The story of Football Index is one of regulatory deficiency, misunderstanding and failure by Government bodies to work together in the best interests of consumers. The Gambling Commission’s chief executive officer, Andrew Rhodes, said himself, in his September 2021 response to the inquiry into BetIndex:

“The lines between what is gambling and other types of products, such as financial services or computer games, has become increasingly blurred and no longer neatly fit into existing statutory definitions of gambling.”

Put simply, the lines were blurred and consumers trusted the product because it was licensed by a UK regulator.

However, the key issue is that the Gambling Commission did not have a firm grip of what it was licensing. Football Index managed to slip through the cracks between the Gambling Commission, the FCA, the Advertising Standards Authority and other bodies. The nature of the product meant that nobody was really sure who was responsible for regulating it, so nobody took full responsibility. While the Gambling Commission and the FCA sat on their hands, deciding how to deal with this new and unfamiliar product, vulnerable consumers were falling victim to Football Index’s misleading product and losing life-changing sums in the process.

One constituent told me they had lost £13,000—a sum totalling the majority of their life savings. Another has lost £50,000—a loss made even more sickening by the fact that their interactions with Football Index did not start until June 2020, long after the deficiencies had been exposed. I am sure that I do not need to explain the impact that losses of that magnitude have had on their mental health.

I know that the gambling White Paper is due to be published, and I hope that the proposals will strengthen consumer protections, the lack of which has cost Football Index customers millions. We must ensure that action to protect consumers from such schemes can be taken earlier, so that people do not continue gambling on a



product that should not have been licensed. We need reassurance that the deficiency in regulation that allowed Football Index to slip through the cracks is remedied.

Finally, I agree with those who have said that we must ensure that customers receive compensation. Government regulation and licensing failed these consumers; the Government should do all they can to ensure that those owed money receive full reimbursement.

4.57 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Ghani. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing today's debate. As we can see, it has been very well attended.

This issue has been described as the biggest scandal in British gambling history, with thousands of customers facing cumulative losses of up to £124 million. However, I think that describing it purely as a gambling scandal does not really show any empathy or understanding about the magnitude. Comments such as those attributed to the Gambling Commission—that people should not gamble more than they can afford to lose—fail to acknowledge this was not like putting a tenner on the 2.20 at Chepstow. Football Index promoted itself as an investment, with “guaranteed yields” in a highly regulated environment, and no bets have actually been lost, of course; the money was effectively stolen.

I have a constituent who has lost a six-figure sum, and some people's losses are into seven figures. Individuals have been driven to the brink of suicide, marriages have collapsed, families have been torn apart, and life savings for weddings, house deposits or retirements have all vanished. This was not about people chasing their losses; it was money that was supposed to have been invested and was then wrongfully taken. While there has been a Government review—and, of course, promises to do better next time—there has not been justice.

Football Index has been described as a Ponzi scheme, and we now know that its executives were warned soon after its launch, as early as 2016, that its so-called stock market would prove to be unsustainable. Proposals to make the index more stable were actually rejected because of concerns about the possible impact on revenue. That all occurred some five years before Football Index's eventual collapse, leaving serious questions about the effectiveness of its regulation.

According to newspaper reports, the Gambling Commission was warned in January 2020 that Football Index was

“an exceptionally dangerous pyramid scheme under the guise of a football stock market”.

Has the Minister spoken to the Gambling Commission about this? What did it say? What conclusions has the Minister drawn following this?

**Aaron Bell:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way because it allows me to make a point that I should have made in my speech. I believe that the new CEO of the Gambling Commission, Andrew Rhodes, understands the problems that occurred in the past. I met him in February to discuss this case and my overall experience with the sector. I think he accepts that mistakes were made repeatedly under the previous leadership of the Gambling Commission. I wanted to put that on the record and I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to do so.

**Justin Madders:** I am sure that we will all note that improvement in regulation. It has been a failure; that is implicit from what has been said. It reminds me a bit of the leasehold scandal. People expected products to be sold in a safe way—these were similar, life-changing sums of money—and they have been found not to be secure.

We need some concrete assurances that the blurred lines, as we have heard, are not going to cause problems in the future and that there is going to be a clear delineation of responsibility for regulation in the future. We know from what a former employee said that senior management were warned back in 2016 that there was a problem, but the company continued to take money from people in that way for another four years. I want to know what has happened to those people in charge of the company. What sanctions have been issued against them? Are they fit to be involved in any businesses at all? That is a serious question that needs answering.

In conclusion, as we have heard, the lines between what is gambling and what are financial services are increasingly blurred. Nothing fits into a neat statutory category anymore. What is clear, however, is that there need to be proper protections and regulations for our constituents so that something like this never happens again.

5.1 pm

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in this debate on behalf of a number of constituents who were affected by the Football Index scandal—in particular, two gentlemen called Marc and Andrew. Both invested significant sums of money in products that they believed were safe because they were regulated. Marc has made it clear to me that he is not a gambler and has never so much as put on a bet. He got involved with this because he was reassured that it was a regulated product. He thought it was safe and looked into it before putting any money in. He put his money in gradually and did not put it all in in one big lump sum because he was reassured by the regulation that existed. It was sold very much as an investment opportunity based on football knowledge. Given the sums of money that have been lost here—we are talking life savings; tens of thousands of pounds—it really does feel quite woeful that the Government are not stepping in to provide some form of redress.

It is clear that the company was still trading and attracting new customers even when concerns had been raised, to the detriment of many people who invested in good faith during that period. It was batted back and forth between the Gambling Commission and the FCA and, in a clear case of regulatory failure, neither was willing to take full responsibility for a product that should not have been licensed if nobody quite understood what it was for. The Government need to explain why those who lost out as part of the London Capital & Finance scandal have been entitled to a compensation scheme, but not those who have been affected by Football Index. For many, the sums of money involved are much the same, as are the failures of regulation.

I spoke to Marc on the phone last week and he has been left absolutely devastated by this. He and his wife separated for a while. He is still suffering from depression and anxiety, and he is on medication as a result. He feels very let down by the regulators, who should have kept

[Alison Thewliss]

him and all the others in this scheme safe. There is a big gap here. The Government may well say that they will learn from this, they will go forward and it will not happen again, but that is simply not good enough for my constituents. They should not be collateral damage in a regulatory failure. They deserve recompense, because the regulators who ought to have protected them failed in their duty to do so.

5.4 pm

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Ghani. I also want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for bringing this debate and to acknowledge the excellent contributions we have heard so far.

The £124 million spent on the Football Index scandal was not lost—it did not disappear down the sofa and it did not fall out of a purse. It was taken in a business model that was rightly described by the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) as a Ponzi scheme. A scheme that was allowed to happen because the Gambling Commission and the FCA failed in their duty to regulate gambling firms and protect consumers, and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport did not act when warned.

The Gambling Commission was told on many occasions, and certainly by somebody who knew the business back in January 2020, that the Football Index was deliberately imitating an investment product and that it was leading to users

“believing that they were investing rather than gambling”.

People were conned to bet—sometimes tens of thousands of pounds, and even six-figure sums, as colleagues have already mentioned.

**Sir George Howarth** (Knowsley) (Lab): The recurring theme throughout this debate has been the regulatory failure that my hon. Friend refers to. Does she agree that in such circumstances the Government are the only organisation that can put it right?

**Ruth Cadbury**: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will come to that point. As I say, there were various stages. The Gambling Commission took over a year to withdraw the licence and say that Football Index’s product was an exceptionally dangerous pyramid scheme under the guise of a football stock index. By submitting a written question to Ministers, I found out that it then took over a year for the Gambling Commission to warn the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. It was not until 10 March 2021 that a letter went from the Gambling Commission to DCMS. In that year, a gaping black hole existed, and through that black hole went the hard-earned savings of my constituents and those of many others. Millions of pounds went down that black hole.

As hon. Members have said, there is a wider point. The scandal points to yet another failure of financial regulation in the UK. The FCA was set up to protect consumers, but we saw that it failed to act over the collapse of London Capital and Finance, which affected other constituents of mine, and many other schemes have taken people’s hard-earned savings. The FCA needs to be strengthened, because we cannot have a financial regulatory regime that is effectively a Potemkin village

that exists in name but takes no real action and does not do enough to warn people about scams. My constituents, and the thousands who have been conned out of their money, deserve better than this.

5.7 pm

**Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for securing this important debate.

The collapse of Football Index in March 2021 left a trail of human misery in its wake. Some £90 million-worth of open stakes has vanished, with an average loss of £3,000 per customer—a life-changing sum for anyone. For some of the people I represent, however, those losses have been far greater still. I have heard from pensioners whose entire life savings have been snatched away, and from constituents who lost more than £100,000 when the platform collapsed. My constituents are not stupid, and nor are they gamblers whose luck simply ran out. They are victims of an unscrupulous, if not outright criminal, scheme that wilfully misled the Gambling Commission, pedalled lies about the state of its financial health, violated the terms of its licence and cynically preyed on fans’ passion for the beautiful game. They deserve so much better than the condescension that has accompanied Football Index’s demise.

Few have been quite as tone-deaf as the chief executive officer of the Gambling Commission, Andrew Rhodes, who had the temerity to lecture victims still coming to terms with their losses by saying that

“no one should gamble more than they can afford to lose.”

In fact, Rhodes and the commission he oversees still have serious questions to answer about their role in this whole saga, because if this is a story about unchecked greed, it is also a story of chronic regulatory failings. The Gambling Commission issued a licence for a product that it did not understand, and ordinary customers were forced to pay the price. Despite receiving warnings about systemic flaws with the index in January 2020, it was not until May 2020 that the commission began investigating. In that time, Football Index signed a sponsorship deal with Queen’s Park Rangers, lending further legitimacy to this elaborate pyramid scheme.

The simple truth is that thousands of Football Index consumers were failed by the very people who were supposed to protect them. My constituents now deserve justice, but despite the publication of the independent review in September last year, it still seems to be a long way away. Successive announcements by both DCMS and the Gambling Commission that no compensation will be made available will come as a bitter blow to people living in my constituency, whose lives have been changed irrevocably as a result of the collapse, and the continued existence of platforms seemingly mimicking Football Index’s business model—including AllStars Trader, which is run by a former Football Index employee—shows that not nearly enough is being done to stop the catastrophe repeating itself. The fact that Football Index was allowed to trade without any oversight from the Financial Conduct Authority, despite styling itself as a trading platform, shows just how badly regulatory reform is needed.

Football Index was not the only app that encouraged ordinary people to hand over small fortunes with the promise of massive returns. In recent years we have seen

a massive upsurge in a number of online trading platforms becoming available to ordinary people, such as eToro, Freetrade and Robinhood. Like Football Index, those apps promise ordinary people a way to break into a world previously dominated by big banks and the mega-rich. Those sites, although legal, tempt ordinary people into ploughing massive sums of money into investments that they often have no hope of understanding. Many even model themselves on video games, with users receiving constant pushes to keep investing more.

Despite the obscene amounts of money involved, Ministers are still playing catch-up, and today the world of online investments resembles the wild west, with ordinary people enjoying little to no protection from financial ruin. Without far-reaching reform of the regulations governing those platforms, I fear that the Football Index scandal is doomed to repeat itself. Ministers must act now.

5.10 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I have a number of constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran who have lost significant sums of money as a result of the collapse of Football Index. Football Index customers were not properly protected, as we have heard today. We know that the Gambling Commission ignored warnings about the business model of the platform, and that the Financial Conduct Authority identified areas for improvement for the company.

The whole shameful episode underlines exactly why we urgently need gambling reform. Gambling must be better regulated. The Gambling Commission, which failed Football Index customers, must be more effective. Customers must have confidence that they will have better protection in future. It is very disappointing that there seems to be no route for redress for those who have suffered significant losses following the collapse of Football Index. In total, about £90 million was lost.

That platform was approved and its licence authorised by the Gambling Commission. The Gambling Commission failed to carry out due diligence, and consumers have paid very heavily for that failure. How is that fair? Why should unsuspecting customers pay for that failure? Clearly, the Gambling Commission's conduct and competence was not what it needed to be, and its regulation and effectiveness of enforcement was not fit for purpose. One of the many lessons to learn from that is that we must have a gambling ombudsman, to ensure that consumers have a clear avenue for redress.

Those who were caught up in the Football Index scandal and lost a lot of money have been failed at every turn by the very regulation that is supposed to protect them. I urge the Minister to put that right and to not fail them again by turning his back on them. I urge him to compensate the victims and ensure a full review of the Gambling Act 2005, informed by the independent report on the regulation of Football Index. This cannot be allowed to happen again. The whole gambling industry, as well as consumers, will benefit if there is legislation and protection in which everyone can have confidence.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair)**: Before I call Ben Lake, I want to say that, because everyone's contributions have been remarkably in time and so powerful, the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson will have four minutes and the Minister will have eight. I have no doubt that he will take many interventions.

5.13 pm

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. I thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for securing this important debate.

The collapse of Football Index has wrought devastation on so many of my constituents, as it has for those of many hon. Members. I have heard stories of people losing deposits for their first homes and savings for marriages. Lives have been ruined. I associate myself with the comments of the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), in which she completely demolished the regulators by outlining the failure to prevent this crisis.

The Government's independent report showed that the platform was not properly understood by the Gambling Commission, which did not carry out effective scrutiny of the product or respond quickly to the issues raised. The same could be said of the Financial Conduct Authority. I associate myself with the comments of the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), in saying that we must not allow the false narrative to emerge that these people gambled too much and were irresponsible. Far from it—we heard of insiders warning regulators, trying to blow the whistle on the failings, in 2020.

The UK Advertising Standards Authority also ruled against Football Index on a number of occasions in the years preceding its collapse, including for not making the financial risks of its product clear, and in particular for creating the impression that it was an investment opportunity rather than a betting product. The last ruling was made in September 2019, which prompts the question: why were these warning signs not heeded by the other regulators?

That the ASA ruling led to no meaningful action being taken by either the Gambling Commission or the FCA compounds the litany of failures that led to the current situation—one that could and should have been avoided. Many, possibly all, of us are supportive of compensation for those who have lost out from Football Index.

I am anticipating some of the reasons why the Government might say they will not issue financial redress. Why not use the sizable funds levied by the Financial Conduct Authority and the Gambling Commission from fines and regulatory settlements to pay back Football Index users? For instance, the Gambling Commission issued £58 million-worth of fines between June 2014 and December 2019. More recently, it issued a £9.4 million fine to online operator 888, and the FCA fined GAM International over £9 million just last month. Why cannot those funds be allocated to contribute towards financial redress for those who have lost an estimated £90 million? They certainly deserve it, because it is clear that the regulators with the duty to protect them failed.

5.16 pm

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on bringing forward this debate. I was assured as recently as this morning in this very room by a Government Minister that the gambling review White Paper is due in the coming weeks. Minister, we cannot keep meeting like this. Among

[Ronnie Cowan]

a range of reforms, the gambling review White Paper must effectively regulate the digital age, and consumers must be better protected from Ponzi schemes.

BetIndex Ltd, trading as Football Index, was a sports betting platform. An operating licence was issued to BetIndex by the Gambling Commission in September 2015. It was BetIndex's decision to dramatically decrease its dividend payment by 82% that led to a virtual market crash on the site. Scandalously, days before the crash, Football Index minted new shares in footballers, enticing consumers to purchase shares that some days later would be worth far less than their former value.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): One employee from the firm stated that 100 people were employed by Football Index. Some, but not all, of those had salaries of £1 million. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that the investigation should pursue the directors, who seem to be well off at this moment?

**Ronnie Cowan:** Absolutely. I will touch on that briefly later. I watched "Question Time" from Belfast a couple of weeks ago, and I was surprised that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) did not intervene at any point.

BetIndex failed to properly notify the Gambling Commission of the nature of the product in its licence application. The Gambling Commission could have responded better, with earlier scrutiny of the product offered by BetIndex, quicker decision making and action, and better escalation of the issues, but it did not do so. The Gambling Commission ignored warnings that its business model was flawed and that customers' money could be at risk. Although Football Index was not regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, the report identified areas for improvement for the FCA. Those included its speed of response to requests from the Gambling Commission.

Football Index is a scandal that underlines the need for wholesale reform of the gambling industry and raises significant questions about the Gambling Commission, given that it saw fit to license the platform and failed to enact adequate oversight. In the regulated sector, when people gamble they should have confidence that they are doing so on the basis of the outcome of a wager. It should not be a gamble on the solvency or sustainability of the licensed operator.

This scandal shows how much a gambling ombudsman is needed to ensure that consumers have a clear avenue for redress in circumstances such as the Football Index scandal. The Government said that they would not use public funds to compensate customers who have lost money, despite customers losing up to, at a modest estimate, £90 million. BetIndex Ltd was approved and operated a licence authorised by the Gambling Commission. The failure is on the regulator as much as it is on the Ponzi scheme that stole consumers' cash. The Government should be doing more to protect their citizens and should act swiftly when they have let them down. The ex-CEO of Football Index, Adam Cole, has been named persona non grata by the Jersey Gambling Commission, with the regulator citing the executive's track record as the reason for its decision. While the Jersey Gambling Commission has stepped up, there are no immediate plans for the UK Gambling Commission to act.

At the heart of the scandal are those robbed of their money. One football fan has revealed that he lost £98,000, saying:

"It has completely torn my life apart...It is all the money I've ever saved, almost everything I've ever had and has put quite simply left me on the verge of committing suicide."

This is a wrong that needs to be made right through better legislation, stronger enforcement and compensation to those swindled by BetIndex.

5.20 pm

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is good to see you in the Chair, Ms Ghani. I pass on the apologies of the shadow Minister responsible for gambling, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), for her absence. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this debate, and thank her for everything she does in fighting for justice for those affected by the collapse of Football Index.

Like me, most MPs will have heard examples of the devastating impact of the Football Index collapse on their constituents. The sheer number of MPs wanting to take part in an hour-long debate is evidence of the seriousness of the issue. Members on both sides of the Chamber have made excellent speeches articulating the pain that many of our constituents have gone through. People have lost tens of thousands of pounds that were supposed to be for their families' future. Marriages and relationships have fallen apart. The stress and guilt of the experience have induced severe physical health problems; people are even suffering from depression and becoming suicidal. It should never have been allowed to happen.

It is clear that there has been a massive failure of regulation. When the Government commissioned their report on the collapse, there were concerns among those affected that the review did not sufficiently interrogate or challenge the Gambling Commission's explanation of events, and I would be grateful to hear the Minister's comments on those concerns. Nevertheless, the report identified clear failings: BetIndex did not properly notify the Gambling Commission of the nature of and changes to the product in its licensing application; the Gambling Commission responded slowly to the challenges raised by the product; and the Financial Conduct Authority could also have done more to help.

Perhaps the most devastating aspect of the scandal is that many of those who ended up losing money believed that what they were doing was safer than what we might call normal gambling. The marketing for the product was couched in the language of investment, not betting, and it was promoted as a safe venture with "guaranteed yields", which led people into this position. The fact that the product was licensed, appeared in TV and radio adverts and acted as the sponsor on the football shirts of three teams gave it an air of legitimacy that it should not have had. It was a major failing of regulation and demonstrates why we urgently need reform.

Reports suggest that the long-overdue gambling White Paper is finally set to be published this month. I repeat the plea I made to the Minister when we faced each other this morning in this Chamber that this is urgent. Earlier, the Minister said that the White Paper would be published in the coming weeks, which is welcome. Can he confirm that it will be before the summer recess?

That would be welcomed by people who have been affected by this scandal and by other problem gambling, because we need the time to assess and debate it.

That kind of wide-ranging and evidence-based reform of our gambling legislation will hopefully prevent anything like this from happening again and impacting on others in future. Of course, the hope of future reform, and the improvements so far from the Gambling Commission, do nothing to help those who have already been impacted. The Government have said that they will not use public funds to provide compensation for the losses caused by the Football Index collapse. They have signposted those affected to seek reimbursement from BetIndex's liquidation process, but it is becoming clear that the process will not yield enough to those who have been failed.

Many have called for the creation of an ombudsman to get redress for Football Index's victims. The Opposition think that the Government should look seriously at that useful proposal. There certainly needs to be more action to get redress for victims. The collapse of Football Index has had a shattering impact on many people's lives. People were badly misled, and our existing regulatory mechanisms failed. It cannot happen again.

5.24 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Ms Ghani.

I should like to begin by thanking the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for securing this debate, and all those who have contributed to it. She and many others have raised the collapse of Football Index with my Department on a number of occasions. I apologise on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who has ministerial responsibilities for gambling, but he cannot be here, as he is serving on a Bill Committee. As tempting as it is to make all sorts of promises on behalf of another Minister, I had better not do so. I will try to answer as many questions as I can, and where I cannot do so I will ask my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South to write to hon. Members.

I will not detain Members by going through the full history of Football Index or explaining what the product is. I think that most Members in the Chamber unfortunately are quite familiar with the circumstances, but it is important to give a brief outline of what happened. BetIndex was licensed by the Gambling Commission in September 2015, and it operated a product called Football Index. The commission's scrutiny of the company increased in May 2019, when an internal compliance assessment flagged a number of concerns. In July 2019, the commission contacted the Financial Conduct Authority to ask for its view on BetIndex's activities due to some of the features of the product, which have been outlined by hon. Members. The commission subsequently launched a formal licence review in May 2020. It cited a number of concerns about the product, including terms and conditions.

The investigation was in train when, in March 2021, the commission learned that the company planned to suspend its operations and freeze customer funds, which would breach its licence conditions. The commission suspended BetIndex's licence and the company subsequently

entered administration. The reasons behind the collapse of BetIndex are important. The suspension of football matches during lockdown in March to June 2020 played a significant role in the financial difficulties that the company faced. Its business model was based on live football and media coverage of it. For a period of time, that did not exist. In March 2021, BetIndex announced a drastic reduction in the returns that it paid out to customers. It hoped that that would allow the company to recover and customers to continue using the product, but unfortunately that failed.

The Government took the concerns of those affected by the collapse of Football Index very seriously. That is why we acted quickly to appoint Malcolm Sheehan QC in June last year, to lead an independent review into the regulation of the company. We are grateful to Mr Sheehan and his team for their extensive investigation, thorough report and clear recommendations, which we have welcomed. The review highlighted a number of wider factors relevant to the way in which this situation came about, including the actions of BetIndex and the impact of covid, as I have mentioned, but it also identified areas for improvement for both the Gambling Commission and the FCA. Areas for improvement have been highlighted by several hon. Members today.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South said in his written ministerial statement in September last year, the report identified areas where the commission could have been more effective in responding to the challenges raised by the novel product—Football Index—including earlier scrutiny and the speed of decision making. Although BetIndex was not regulated by the FCA, the report also looked at the FCA's role in working with the commission, and identified some areas for improvement, including the speed of response to the commission's requests.

I am pleased that both bodies have acted on the recommendations to ensure that a similar situation does not happen again. That is a key ask from many Members today. Actions have included such things as the Gambling Commission updating the way in which it assesses risk so that novel products are properly considered; and the commission publishing a consultation on changes to its licensing policy, clarifying that it will not normally grant a licence to products that contain language associated with financial products or which require dual regulation.

**Sir George Howarth:** Does the Minister accept that if people are going to be compensated for the losses that they have sustained, that will require active intervention from the Government? Will he consider the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) about using fines as a possible way of compensating people?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I was going to come on to that point. Unfortunately, that ask is not possible, for a couple of reasons. The FCA is required by law to pass revenue from fines to the Treasury, net of enforcement costs, and the Treasury is required to place that into the Consolidated Fund, to be used for Government Departments on important public services. That is the law. The Gambling Commission fines are used for socially responsible purposes, usually for specific projects to reduce gambling harms. I completely understand the intent behind the request, but I am afraid that it is not possible.

[Nigel Huddleston]

Going back to the changes made as a result of the recommendation, the Gambling Commission and the FCA are also signing a strengthened memorandum of understanding to improve co-operation, and the FCA has nominated an executive director to oversee its relationship with the commission. Therefore, some changes have already happened and others are happening now.

Even though the independent report has been published, other processes are ongoing. First, administration proceedings continue, which may result in some money being refunded to customers. Secondly, the Gambling Commission referred BetIndex to the Insolvency Service and asked it to consider whether the actions of BetIndex's directors prior to administration breached insolvency or fraud laws.

**Ronnie Cowan:** I have listened to what the Minister has said about compensation. Under section 123 of the Gambling Act 2005, the DCMS Secretary can impose a levy, at the level they determine, for any purpose whatsoever.

**Nigel Huddleston:** With regard to compensation, as I have said, there are procedures that we cannot move from. It is also very clear that we strongly sympathise—everybody strongly sympathises. As a constituency MP, I also have constituents who have been impacted by the collapse and who have lost money. We have heard today anger and frustration about the genuine hardship—both financial and, of course, mental—caused by the collapse. However, we do not think it would be appropriate for the Government to use public funds to cover losses to individuals resulting from the collapse of a gambling company. Consumers staking money on gambling is not the same as their placing money into other things, such as savings products. Furthermore, the Gambling Commission does not have any statutory powers that would enable it to offer redress for losses suffered as the result of a gambling operator collapsing.

I know that I need to leave time for the hon. Member for Blaydon to respond to the debate, so I will briefly refer to a couple of other points that hon. Members

have made. On the Insolvency Service investigation, BetIndex entered into administration on 26 March 2021 and administrators are required to report to the Insolvency Service on company directors' conduct. Following information received from the administrators and the Gambling Commission, the Insolvency Service has confirmed that it is investigating the conduct of BetIndex's directors.

The hon. Member for Blaydon asked for a meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South. I will pass that request on, rather than make a promise on his behalf, but I am sure that he will receive that request with respect. I will also ask him to respond to a couple of other items that she asked about. Please be in no doubt of the seriousness with which the Government take all the matters that have been highlighted today, and the gambling review will indeed be announced in the coming weeks.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair):** Ms Twist, you have about a minute in which to wind up.

5.33 pm

**Liz Twist:** I thank every Member present, from every nation and every party, for being united in one object—seeking redress and making sure that things like this cannot happen again. I also thank all those Football Index “investors”—which is what they thought they were—for their help in this debate. I welcome the Minister's assurance that he will refer my requests to the relevant Minister, and I look forward to hearing back directly, because there is ground for further discussion.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the impact of the collapse of Football Index.

5.34 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

*Tuesday 7 June 2022*

## CABINET OFFICE

### Digital Economy Act 2017: Data Sharing

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler):** The Cabinet Office's Central Digital and Data Office has today published the Government's response to the public consultation on data sharing to support early learning and childcare in Scotland.

In January 2022, the UK Government, in partnership with the Scottish Government, consulted on draft regulations to enable data sharing to target funded early learning and childcare for certain two-year-olds in Scotland. The consultation set out draft regulations to allow data sharing between HMRC, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities in order to help identify and contact households that have a two-year-old eligible for funded early learning and childcare, or ELC. The regulations would create an objective for the purpose of which relevant data may be shared under section 35 of the Digital Economy Act 2017—otherwise known as the public service delivery power.

There were 69 responses during the eight-week consultation period. Responses were decidedly positive. A clear majority of respondents agreed that the proposed data share would improve and target a service to eligible households and improve their wellbeing. Respondents also agreed that the data sharing would deliver tangible benefits to households, including early stage support to promote education, health and social equalities.

Importantly, the majority of respondents agreed that the personal data items to be shared, specifically including the customer—parent or carer—name, address and National Insurance number for unique identification, as well as a child or children indicator to confirm the existence of a child, or children, is limited to what is necessary and consistent with ELC service delivery.

The UK Government are reassured that the responses are broadly positive and welcome the helpful input from respondents. As the Scottish Parliament can only approve proposals for new objectives which solely involve specified Scottish bodies permitted to make use of the public service delivery power, and the proposed objective would involve disclosure and processing of data held by UK Departments HMRC and DWP, the draft regulations must be taken through the UK Parliament by the UK Government. The UK Government will take forward legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

I have asked that the Government response be deposited in the Library of both Houses in Parliament and published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk).

[HCWS78]

### Sir Robert Francis QC's Infected Blood Compensation Study

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis):** Today the Government are publishing the study by Sir Robert Francis QC, which was commissioned by my predecessor as Paymaster General, the right hon. Penny Mordaunt MP.

The study makes recommendations for a framework for compensation and redress for the victims of infected blood, which can be ready to implement upon the conclusion of the infected blood inquiry, should the inquiry's findings and recommendations require it.

Sir Robert's study is comprehensive and detailed, and reflects the contributions of many individuals directly affected by infected blood, their recognised legal representatives, and campaign groups representing the infected and affected communities, many of whom participated in a series of meetings held by the study from July 2021 to February 2022. Sir Robert makes clear the importance of these contributions by introducing his study with a collection of moving, heartbreaking and sometimes shocking quotations from some of those who spoke to him. It is right that their views and experiences should be at the heart of his work, and I would like once again to thank all those who contributed to the study and shared their experiences with Sir Robert. I do not underestimate how difficult this must have been for many, and I am grateful for their courage.

Sir Robert will give evidence about his work to the infected blood inquiry on 11 and 12 July. Before then, it is important that the inquiry, and recognised legal representatives of its infected and affected core participants, have an opportunity to consider his work; it is most important that the Government are able to reflect upon Sir Robert's evidence to the inquiry in considering his study.

There is a great deal of complexity to the issues that the study covers and a wide range of factors to be taken into account in considering Sir Robert's recommendations. This analysis cannot be completed hurriedly but officials across Government are focusing on this so that the Government can be ready to respond quickly to the inquiry's recommendations, as was intended when the study was commissioned. I will update the House as this work progresses.

I would like, once again, to thank Sir Robert and his team for their work and the timely delivery of the study.

I have asked that a copy of the study be deposited in the Library of both Houses in Parliament.

[HCWS79]





# ORAL ANSWERS

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