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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 7 November 2022

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. RISHI SUNAK, MP, OCTOBER 2022)

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

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

FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 722

NINTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2022-2023

House of Commons

Monday 7 November 2022

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

COMMITTEE OF SELECTION

Ordered,

That Craig Whittaker and Nigel Huddleston be discharged from the Committee of Selection and Marcus Jones and Steve Double be added.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Defence Procurement System

1. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the defence procurement system. [902068]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): Defence procurement is some of the most complex in Government, but our defence and security industrial strategy, published last year, represents a step change that will see industry, Government and academia working ever closer together, while fundamentally reforming regulations to improve the speed of acquisition and ensure we incentivise innovation and productivity.

Dame Diana Johnson: It has been reported that the Ministry of Defence has wasted £15 billion of taxpayers' money on mismanaged procurement since 2010, with £5 billion of it since 2019. Might the Secretary of State

just set out in a little bit more detail how he is going to deal with that type of waste and stop it happening in the future?

Mr Wallace: I am afraid that the right hon. Lady has obviously lapped up the Labour Front Benchers' dodgy dossier on defence procurement. Of course, over half of the figure she used was under the previous Labour Government. Labour double-counted, including in that dossier, and indeed made no reference to the fact that the top 15 projects under Labour, in its last period of power, produced a £4.5 billion overspend and a 339-month out-of-date period for projects.

As I said, these are very complex processes. We often make sure that we try to meet the demand and the threat, but some of these projects last 20 years. We have made significant steps to change and reform that, and the right hon. Lady will be glad to know that this year—or last year and the year before—the MOD came in on budget for its overall budget, with a balanced budget for the first time for decades.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Type 26 frigate is literally a world-beating design, which we have exported to both Canada and Australia, and we all want to see it in service as soon as possible. So it is doubly disappointing that, last week, the Department issued a written ministerial statement to say her entry into service is now delayed a further year from October 2027 to October 2028 and the lifetime cost to the programme will be over a quarter of a billion pounds more of taxpayers' money. Given the defence budget is likely to come under great pressure, why does it take BAE Systems 11 years to build a ship the Japs can build in four?

Mr Speaker: Just before the Secretary of State answers, may I say that we even have the Speaker of Canada here, which is very appropriate.

Mr Wallace: First, just like in Canada, industrial complexes are facing post-covid skills challenges and indeed supply chain challenges—because our ships, just like everybody else's ships, use international supply chains—and that has got involved in the timetable,

which obviously has a knock-on effect on cost. However, where there have been supply chain problems, my team and I have personally made sure I have not only visited the manufacturer to grip the situation, but discussed it with the prime. It is incredibly important when we place these contracts, and the contracts are for billions of pounds, that the prime contractors, be they British or foreign, deliver in accordance with them. That is why, in future contracts, I have made sure not only that we do as much as we can to build in Britain, but that we get the primes to invest in the infrastructure of British yards and the skills base of British people to ensure this does not happen again.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): General Dynamics reports strong progress on the troubled Ajax programme, so can the Secretary of State confirm that a solution to the noise and vibration issues has now been found?

Mr Wallace: First, we expect General Dynamics to stick within the terms of its contract, and we will stick to our side of the contract. The user validation trials, which are the first steps in getting this Ajax programme back on track, have now been completed. We are looking at the results and hope to start the next phase soon, which is good news all round.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What plans does my right hon. Friend have to further invest in and enhance our sovereign defence manufacturing capability, which not only provides us with a massive strategic benefit but is great for jobs and apprenticeships?

Mr Wallace: When we published the defence Command Paper, we committed to invest £23 billion in our land capabilities over the next 10 years—a significant investment in land. That was accompanied by a land industrial strategy. It has also been accompanied by a defence and security industrial strategy that puts a lot of weight on ensuring that we support a sovereign supply chain where possible, and that we invest in skills. A number of working groups in Government are designed to do just that, and to both improve the skills base, but also to ensure that, where possible, we get the best social value and indeed a British supply chain.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): It was an honour to join you, Mr Speaker, the Canadian Speaker, the Defence Secretary and other Members of the House earlier today for the opening of the constituency garden of remembrance. At last week's Defence Committee, the Secretary of State was asked when the MOD would sign a contract to make the new next-generation light anti-tank weapons that are needed both for Ukraine and to restock the British Army. He said:

“We have signed the first contract for next year.”

If the Defence Secretary was correct, Saab would have notified the market, but it has not. Would the Defence Secretary like to correct the record, and will he confirm when the MOD will get its act together and get that contract in place for new UK production, as this is day 257 of Putin's war on Ukraine?

Mr Wallace: I am sorry to disappoint the right hon. Gentleman, but I did not say in my evidence that it was with Thales that I placed a contract for NLAW replacement, and many other people can give us access to NLAWs.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Dave Doogan.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State confirm the amount that the United Kingdom has spent on the defence nuclear enterprise in the past financial year 2021-22, and the equal but opposite cost of that nuclear expenditure to operational capacity, conventional equipment procurement, investment in service accommodation, and all other underfunded UK defence priorities?

Mr Wallace: We need to try to ensure that we find the funding to fund all those capabilities, and we must ensure at the time of placing a contract that we have certainty in the costs overall, to make sure there are no overruns.

Dave Doogan: The Secretary of State never answered my question, because he was not listening to the question. The answer is £6.6 billion, and that is to fund what we hear is the UK's independent nuclear deterrent. I have a fairly well honed view of what independence looks like, and it does not look like the Secretary of State going cap in hand to the United States to ask it to bring forward its development of the W93 nuclear warhead. Will he explain what is independent about the UK's nuclear dependency on the United States, except the cost in dollars for those weapons?

Mr Wallace: Where do I start? What is independent? I will tell the hon. Gentleman what is not independent, which is the SNP Government in Scotland placing a contract for ferries in Turkey. Supporting Scottish yards? That is not very independent.

The hon. Gentleman will know, as he seems to have a real interest in the technology and development of the nuclear warhead, that under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty we cannot ask the Americans to develop a nuclear weapon for us. That has to be done sovereignly, and if he read that treaty he would understand that.

Nuclear Testing Veterans: Service Medals

2. **Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): If he will take steps with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure that British nuclear testing veterans are awarded service medals. [902069]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr Andrew Murrison): I pay tribute to our nuclear test veterans in this 70th anniversary year of our first nuclear test, and we look forward to the commemorative event at the National Memorial Arboretum later this month. The award of a medal to nuclear test veterans is first a matter for the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals. The case is being considered through the well-established process for reviewing historical medal cases, and the outcome will be announced in due course.

Rebecca Long Bailey: A Cabinet Office source reportedly told the *Daily Mirror* that the Advisory Military Sub-Committee has recommended to the main Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals that there be no medal for nuclear testing veterans, despite a Government scientist reporting in February that atomic troops were more likely to die, and to die from cancer,

than other servicemen. Given that the Sir John Holmes military medal review in 2012 states clearly that the Prime Minister can personally make a direct recommendation to the sovereign on a medal issue, will he now recommend that those servicemen finally receive the medal they deserve?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but she really ought not believe everything she sees in the pages of the *Daily Mirror*. The procedure is for the Advisory Military Sub-Committee to make a recommendation to the HD Committee, which will make a determination on that matter. She will know well that in June this year the then Prime Minister decided to review the case, and asked the HD Committee to look at it again. She will also be aware of all the money that the Government are putting into nuclear test veterans, in particular the £450,000 project to commemorate and build public understanding of the contribution to our country made by those important veterans.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Rachel Hopkins.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): As we approach Armistice Day, I pay tribute to our armed forces personnel, veterans, forces families and all those lost through conflict over the years. Theirs is the ultimate public service.

As the Minister said, this month marks 70 years since the first British atomic tests in the Pacific. We are the only atomic nation that has not provided recognition or compensation to nuclear test veterans. As well as the warm words, will the Minister commit to ending that scandal by setting out a clear timetable for nuclear test veterans to receive medallic recognition? Will he back Labour's call for a complete review of the medals system to make it easier to recognise exemplary service personnel and veterans of unusual operations, such as those who took part in the Afghanistan withdrawal and nuclear test vets?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady has fallen into the same trap as the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey). She really must not take what she reads in the press at face value. I gave the timetable in my opening remarks, and I said that it is for the HD committee to make a determination, which it will. She must not confuse commemorative coins and medallions with medals. Medals are worn on uniform; medallions and commemorative coins of the sort that other countries have issued cannot be worn.

Veterans: Cost of Living Crisis

3. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the impact of the cost of living crisis on veterans. [902070]

8. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the impact of the cost of living crisis on veterans. [902075]

16. **Simon Lightwood** (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the impact of the cost of living crisis on veterans. [902083]

19. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the impact of the cost of living crisis on veterans. [902086]

25. **Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the impact of the cost of living crisis on veterans. [902092]

Dr Murrison: With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to answer these remarkably similar questions together.

The Government are committed to supporting all households with the current cost of living through initiatives such as the energy price guarantee, cost of living payments—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I help the Minister? These questions are grouped by the Government, not by anybody else.

Dr Murrison: I absolutely accept that, Mr Speaker—I was simply pointing out that they are very similar.

Mr Speaker: Yes, but you are pointing it out to yourself.

Dr Murrison: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

We are working at pace across Government and the service charity sector to understand how the veterans community may be impacted, including in the forthcoming national veterans survey and in the recent Cobseo-led survey relating specifically to the cost of living.

Liz Twist: With up to 80,000 veterans currently in receipt of universal credit—a benefit that was, like others, uprated by only 3.1% in April, which was far below the rate of inflation—what are Ministers doing to step up to support our veterans and their families?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. It is important to understand the extent of this, which is why the Government have backed Cobseo to do a deep dive in October on how the cost of living is impacting on our veterans. In advance of the outcome—the Secretary of State and I will have meetings to discuss that shortly—I point out that we have accepted the armed forces pay review body's recommendations in full, we have frozen the daily food charge to our personnel, we are limiting the increase in accommodation charges, we have increased the availability of wraparound childcare, which is vital for families, and we intend to have a cost of living roundtable before the end of the year.

Chris Elmore: The Royal British Legion has identified a 20% increase in requests for support from veterans in urgent need—that is a deeply concerning figure. The RBL has also put forward information stating that veterans who receive sickness and disability benefits now face extra costs of £500 per month as a consequence of the cost of living crisis. What are Ministers doing to support veterans in this country, who are, frankly, being let down by this Conservative Government?

Dr Murrison: I do not accept that. I have just explained what we are doing to address that. We are trying to understand how the cost of living crisis is impacting on our service and veteran community, and we have already

put in place a large number of interventions that will go some way to addressing it. I expect to meet my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State shortly, with representatives of the service community, to discuss the matter further.

Simon Lightwood: During the cost of living crisis, veterans need to access support such as the war pension scheme and the armed forces compensation scheme, but the latest veterans satisfaction survey shows huge dissatisfaction with Veterans UK, and I have been contacted by a number of constituents who are struggling to make claims. What will the Minister do to address those concerns?

Dr Murrison: There have been issues with some applications for both schemes, but I think the position has improved since last year. Nevertheless, the Government has injected further funds to ensure that matters are expedited. I urge veterans who are concerned to contact the welfare office provided through the veterans agency, to help them to fill out the claims, which can sometimes be complicated. The hon. Gentleman will be very pleased to hear that the Secretary of State is expediting the quinquennial review on the armed forces pension scheme, which will hopefully give him some reassurance on the seriousness with which we are taking that issue.

Vicky Foxcroft: It perhaps might help the Minister if I give him a real-life example. My constituent, Leslie Constable, is an Army veteran who receives a state pension, war pension, Army pension and attendance allowance. He tells me he is finding it increasingly difficult to heat his home and feed himself when prices are rising so quickly. He relies on charity shops and a coat given to him nearly 40 years ago. What is the Minister doing to ensure that veterans such as Mr Constable are receiving the support they need for a dignified retirement, and will he finally commit to keeping the triple lock?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady will know that that is not in my gift, but I point her to the veterans' strategy action plan published in January 2020, which contained over 60 policy commitments at a price of more than £70 million. I just think it is not right for her to suggest that the Government are not exercised by the situation faced not just by veterans, but by people across the country at this extremely difficult time in the economic cycle. We will continue to do what we can to alleviate the pressure on veterans in particular. It is just a pity that in office the Labour party did not come anywhere close to designing an action plan of the sort we published in January.

Julie Elliott: Veterans in Crisis Sunderland is a brilliant organisation that supports veterans in Sunderland, the city I represent and one that sends a huge number of people into the armed forces. The cost of living crisis is having a huge detrimental effect on the mental health of veterans, and many are using food banks. One big issue is people receiving forces pensions who then have to pay that money to universal credit. Will the Minister look at whether leeway can be given for people who have gained their pensions fighting for our country and who are having to pay it back because of the universal credit rules?

Dr Murrison: Universal credit is paid right the way up the income scale depending, as the hon. Lady will well know, on circumstances, number of children and the cost of accommodation. She mentions mental health, which is important to me, too. She will therefore presumably approve of the extra money going into the Armed Forces Covenant Trust to support people with mental health issues. She will also, I hope, approve of the £17.8 million going into Op Courage.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I welcome my right hon. and gallant Friend to his well-deserved place on the Front Bench. I look forward to working with him over the years.

My right hon. and gallant Friend will know that in Wiltshire alone we have 7,000 service children in our schools and that some 96% of all schools in Wiltshire have service kids in them, many of whom benefit from the services pupil premium. That is great, but it ends at age 16. Surely there is an argument in favour of continuing to help those children from 16 to 18, as we have changed the education system as a whole and education at 18 has become the norm.

Dr Murrison: I am very grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend and near neighbour. He invites me to ensure that Wiltshire gets more cash, in particular the excellent Wiltshire College. That is very tempting indeed. I hear what he says, and nobody is keener than I am on improving skills, particularly post 16. I am more than happy to discuss the issue with him, but I suspect that what he suggests would have a significant price tag and our colleagues in the Treasury would rather I did not commit.

Defence Technology Development

4. **Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to develop innovative defence technology. [902071]

23. **James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to develop innovative defence technology. [902090]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Alex Chalk): Successful innovation delivers military effectiveness and advantage, which is why the Ministry of Defence works closely with UK industry and academia, including small and medium-sized enterprises, to identify and invest in innovative technologies that address our most pressing capability challenges, as well as publishing our future priorities to incentivise investment. We are already testing and deploying those technologies, building on the work I saw last week at MOD Abbey Wood.

Andrew Jones: It is very good to see my hon. and learned Friend in his place. I welcome the world-leading investments the Government have made in new technology to combat the threats in the space and cyber realms, but can he assure me that the necessary investment in those new areas acts to complement, not replace, our conventional forces, and that they are also seeing record investment, modernisation and improvement?

Alex Chalk: Our forces must be able to adapt to meet the threats set out in the integrated review. As my hon. Friend rightly said, that includes those relating to the space and cyber domains. The £6.6 billion being invested

in research and development over the four years of this spending review period provides the opportunity to modernise and adapt to meet these new threats, while complementing and in some cases even enhancing the lethality of our conventional forces.

James Sunderland: Does the Minister share my concern that any reduction in defence spending will harm our nascent defence manufacturing industry? What steps can be taken to safeguard our future innovation, development and exports?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who speaks with such authority on these matters. The UK is the largest defence spender in NATO in Europe. That commitment provides the capacity to invest in decisive battle-winning technology now and in the future. The defence and security industrial strategy sets the framework for a strategic relationship with industry, including the need to regard our defence and security industries as strategic capabilities in their own right. We are already seeing a shift towards increasing weight being given to industrial implications ahead of investment decisions.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Reductions in defence spending are not what is hampering our security and defence; it is the fact that we need an increase in defence spending to ensure that we have better security and defence in this country. That is particularly important if we are to develop and keep ahead of our competitors on new technology, not least artificial intelligence. Is the Minister confident that, through the negotiations that we discussed with the Secretary of State last week in the Defence Committee, we will get some sort of increase in the defence budget and that that will be inflation-proofed?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to allocate proper resources to keep this country safe. The Prime Minister was absolutely clear when he was campaigning and since he has been in office that he will give this country what it needs to keep our people and our allies safe. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that we are the largest defence spender in NATO in Europe. That position serves this country and our allies.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I welcome the Minister to his place. Following the Defence Committee's findings that the lack of progress in the space domain in the UK is unacceptable, what are Ministers doing to prioritise the publication of the space-based positioning, navigation and timing programme's conclusions?

Alex Chalk: This country is ahead of the game. We have published the space strategy. We will continue to ensure that work in these new domains—we have spoken about cyber, but space is included—is in place so that we can support and enhance the capability of our conventional forces, and we will ensure that we lead the way in space.

Armistice Day

5. **Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con):** What plans his Department has to commemorate Armistice Day. [902072]

20. **Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con):** What plans his Department has to commemorate Armistice Day. [902087]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): I am pleased to confirm that commemorations across the UK will take place as normal to mark remembrance. I will attend the ceremony at the Cenotaph on Whitehall on Remembrance Sunday, and Ministers will attend services at war memorials across the United Kingdom and in the Falklands.

Maggie Throup: On Armistice Day, we remember generations of brave servicemen and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the defence of our democracy—the same freedoms that the Ukrainian people are fighting for today. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the Long Eaton and Ilkeston branches of the Royal British Legion and, indeed, branches up and down the country who facilitate this act of remembrance each year and who work tirelessly in support of our veterans day in, day out in our communities?

Mr Wallace: Yes, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Our armed forces have fought throughout time for the safety and security of our country and they continue to do so today against all aggressors. Each year, this country unites to remember their sacrifice. I am grateful to all branches of the Royal British Legion who work tirelessly in the community to help to keep Armistice Day in the public conscience.

Sara Britcliffe: The battle of the Somme and the wider theatre of world war one were devastating for northern communities. I am sure that the Secretary of State will be aware of the Accrington Pals, the 700-plus strong battalion that was effectively wiped out on the first day in the Somme. I grew up at a time when living veterans still provided a direct link. As the younger generation today will not have that direct link, what can the Secretary of State do to ensure that the sacrifice and legacy of those brave men is remembered not just on Armistice Day, but more generally?

Mr Speaker: I remind the Secretary of State that the Chorley Pals were part of that Accrington contingent.

Mr Wallace: Never forget the Chorley Pals, Mr Speaker. The Accrington Pals played a hugely significant role on the frontline as part of the 94th Infantry Brigade. In many areas, they bore the brunt of the casualties that the British Army suffered. Of the 700-plus men who went over the top that morning, 585 became casualties, with 230 killed in the first 30 minutes. It is only right that that immense sacrifice continues to be remembered in communities across the United Kingdom. All of us have a role in doing that, whether that is through supporting our British Legion, buying a poppy or attending a parade, but it is also about recognising that we remember these people best by investing in today's armed forces.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that at this time of year it is important that we honour the sacrifice of the merchant navy, which endured such a high proportion of fatalities in conflict. Will he join me in paying tribute to the Merchant Navy Association, including active branches

such as ours in Newport, which does so much to commemorate and support the families of those who undertook such critical and dangerous service?

Mr Wallace: Every year, when I write my wreath, I write “Lest we forget,” not only because we must not forget the lessons of the war, but because we must not forget that war involves our whole population and all our armed services—not just the Army, Navy and Air Force, but groups such as the merchant navy and the women who helped and supported on the civil front. That is what we should never forget: that all of us—all our families, in different ways—stood to defend this country from fascism.

Ukraine: Support for NATO Allies

6. **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support NATO allies in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. [902073]

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey): The United Kingdom has provided substantial support to NATO allies. We temporarily doubled our enhanced forward presence battlegroup in Estonia, with additional enhancements to that battlegroup planned for the longer term. We deployed an aviation taskforce to Lithuania, are contributing to NATO air activity across Europe, are supporting air-to-air refuelling and have bolstered our presence in Poland, as well as Army activity in Bulgaria and Romania.

Chris Clarkson: It is absolutely right that our commitments on defence spending and deployments to NATO allies change in the light of the threat posed by increased Russian aggression and the very real threat of a war on European soil. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our increased deployments show that we remain fully committed to defending every inch of NATO territory, as well as Sweden and Finland, and that that is a clear statement of intent on behalf of this country?

James Heapey: My hon. Friend invites me to make two points. First, one of Putin’s greatest failures of the past nine months is how he has reinvigorated the NATO alliance and restored the *raison d’être* of article 5. Secondly, through their work with many of our allies across the Baltic, the Nordic countries and the high north, our armed forces increasingly have environmental expertise on NATO’s northern flank. They are very much enjoying working with the Finns and the Swedes, every inch of whose territory, as they join NATO, is protected by article 5 just like everywhere else.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): We saw reports at the weekend that almost one third of military accommodation is in need of repair: just shy of 14,000 homes, many with leaks and rot. The Ministry of Defence has apologised but has not yet said what it will do to fix the problem. Over half a billion pounds of taxpayers’ money is spent on contracts, subcontracts—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman’s supplementary is not linked to the question. It has to be linked. I am sorry, but we have to let it go. I call the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Putin’s criminal invasion of Ukraine has led many NATO members to reboot their defence plans. The Defence Secretary now agrees with Labour that the integrated review needs updating. Would it not be absurd to cut the Army any further when Ukraine and our NATO allies are facing such clear and rising hostility? Can the Minister tell us which cuts he wants to reverse? Can he tell us whether further Army cuts will finally be halted, as Labour has consistently argued for?

James Heapey: The integrated review is indeed being refreshed—quite rightly, because in the past nine months we have seen war in Europe and growing belligerence by China in the far east. Exactly what the shape of our nation’s armed forces must look like must be a consequence of those new threats. I am not going to rule anything in or out at the Dispatch Box today, because we need to look at what those competitions with Russia in the immediate term and China in the longer term look like, and what our armed forces therefore need to look like.

Support for Veterans

9. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to support veterans. [902076]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr Andrew Murrison): The Department, through Veterans UK, provides information and advice to our veterans on statutory benefits, pensions and jobs, one-to-one welfare support, and administers service pensions. Under the veterans’ strategy action plan, the UK aims to be the best place in the world to be a veteran by 2080.

Wendy Chamberlain: As someone who worked for the career transition partnership, I know how much many employers value veterans and the service that they provide in employment. Too often, charities are the ones left picking up the pieces, such as Only A Pavement Away, which I met a few weeks ago. It specifically focuses on getting veterans who are a long way from the job market into hard-to-fill vacancies. What more can the Government do to support charities such as that?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. Given her background, she will be aware of the efforts that the Government are putting in to get people into jobs in the public sector. We start in the Departments where perhaps we have some control over: the health and care sector and the prisons service, notably, are good examples, but there are others, including the civil service. The Government will work with charities and others—the Office for Veterans’ Affairs has primacy in that—to ensure that, across Government, we are doing our very best to get people who have a great skill set into jobs.

Fleet Solid Support Ships

10. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): If he will take steps to build the fleet solid support ships in the UK. [902077]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): The initial phase of awarding the contract for fleet solid support ships is due very soon. As that is market-sensitive,

I will limit my response to saying that what I expect from whoever is successful is investment in our yards, in British jobs and in British supply chains.

Alex Cunningham: As a reporter for Radio Clyde in 1979, I remember standing underneath the two ships built for the Polish navy as they were launched into the river—I needed to catch the sound effects. In those days, the UK and other Governments had tremendous pride in our shipbuilding industry, but the Thatcher Government devastated it. Why do today's Tory Government not restore that pride? Why do they not commit, as the Secretary of State suggested, to building those ships in British yards, as the Labour party would do, to provide those 6,000 jobs that could benefit communities across the country?

Mr Wallace: I will certainly ignore the rewriting of history other than to say that we still take pride in the ships that we build in this country. Some of our ships are the very best in the world. We will continue that, unlike the Scottish Government, who seem to think that they cannot make their own ships in Scottish yards and make them in foreign yards.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Chris Evans.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister for Defence Procurement, the hon. and learned Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) to his place. I know his constituency very well, having finished a distant third there in 2005. I have only warm memories of it. I pay tribute to him; we have worked together in the past on issues such as Down syndrome, which have affected us both. I look forward to continuing to work with him.

The fleet solid support contract presents a huge opportunity to the British shipbuilding industry, as well as providing a shot in the arm for British steel if the Government commit to building British by default. However, the GMB union has raised concerns that only significant parts of the build and assembly work will be carried out in this country rather than all the work. Will the Secretary of State address what "significant" means in the practical sense? If a foreign manufacturer wins the contract, how will our sovereign defence manufacturing capabilities be protected?

Mr Wallace: If the hon. Gentleman can point to a single complex military contract, whether in air, land or sea, that has not used international or partner supplier chains, I will be amazed. Typhoon, made in Lancashire, uses partners from Italy, Spain and Germany to create one of the most successful fighter programmes in the world. Our aircraft carrier, though entirely assembled in Rosyth in Fife, will have involved the use of foreign components.

Complex military machines that keep us at the cutting edge of the world involve international collaboration. That is the difference between us and Russia, which has the Stalin taxi factory attitude and ends up with rubbish equipment. We end up with the best because I have the duty of giving the best to the men and women of the Royal Navy. I will find a contract that delivers the best and supports the civil base and British manufacturing, but I will not cut corners for party political ideology from the Opposition.

Radioactive Material: Dalgety Bay

11. **Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba):** What recent discussions he has had with representatives of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency on plans to remove radioactive material from Dalgety Bay. [902078]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Alex Chalk): The Ministry of Defence remains committed to delivering the planned remediation to Dalgety Bay and has worked closely with its partners in the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Fife Council to facilitate this work. MOD and SEPA officials last met formally on 24 November last year to discuss this matter, and the intent is to hold another meeting before the end of the year.

Neale Hanvey: The people of Dalgety Bay in my constituency have been living with radioactive waste on their shoreline since the second world war. The Ministry promised the community, me and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency that remediation would be complete by September this year, yet we continue to hear nothing from the MOD. Can the Minister update me as a matter of urgency on operational progress and ensure that the interests of my constituents are not lost in the chaos of this Tory Government?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question, although perhaps not the bit right at the end. Work has begun. It was suspended to take account of the nesting season but I can say that this project, which incidentally is being undertaken at a cost of several million pounds, is expected to be completed by September 2023. I am happy to liaise with him if he wants to discuss it with me.

Armed Forces Families: "Living in our Shoes" Report

12. **Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con):** What steps he is taking to implement the recommendations of the "Living in our Shoes" report. [902079]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr Andrew Murrison): May I first pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his excellent, comprehensive report? Families are an integral part of the armed forces community, and our evolving assistance to them includes funding wraparound childcare, supporting children's education and the employment of partners as societal expectations evolve and change. The armed forces families strategy, published in January, sets out the Government's response to "Living in our Shoes" and sets the framework for the delivery of more sympathetic policies in relation to armed forces families that are fit for the future.

Andrew Selous: Will the Government make public each of the six monthly service family steering group meetings and the progress that has been made on each of the 106 accepted recommendations, and ensure that we have parity of esteem in the way that we look after both veterans and service families—a wonderful group of people on whom the defence of the nation depends?

Dr Murrison: I am very sympathetic to my hon. Friend. We owe so much to our families and he highlights that very well in his report. Of course we meet service families all the time and I am more than happy to meet him at any time to update him on what we intend to do

as a result of his report and indeed the veterans strategy, published earlier this year, which covered many service families and members of the service community.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): With regard to the report, we learned in the pursuit of a recent constituency case that the Ministry of Defence was not able to decide whether to deduct earnings from service personnel in child maintenance cases, which is leaving some service families in a difficult situation. Can the Minister advise me on how the Ministry of Defence is ensuring that families get the support they are entitled to?

Dr Murrison: I did of course outline some of the ways in which we have been supporting families in my earlier remarks. I would urge anybody in the service community who is concerned about their situation and who wants help to contact their welfare officer through the Veterans Agency. The veterans gateway is an extremely good place to start.

Ukraine: Military Response to Russian Invasion

13. **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the Ukrainian military response to Russia's invasion. [902080]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): We work closely with international partners and Ukraine to ensure that Ukraine receives the right equipment at the right time. Meetings such as those of the Ukraine defence contact group and the international defence co-ordination centre help to prioritise and co-ordinate efforts. The UK and international partners also train Ukrainian recruits in the UK, and we receive regular feedback from the armed forces in Ukraine that allows us to tailor courses to best meet requirements.

Tom Randall: The whole House will have been moved by the heroic bravery of the tens of thousands of Ukrainians who have stepped up to defend their homeland, but they will need the right kit to defeat the Russians. I know that the supply of western weapons has been plentiful, but can my right hon. Friend confirm that the UK is working closely with our NATO allies and the Ukrainians to ensure that the training and equipment received is as useful as possible?

Mr Wallace: Almost within days of the invasion, I convened a donor conference. At the first conference we had nearly 30 nations, and three conferences later, when the United States chaired it in Germany, we had more than 50 nations. We constantly work on that co-ordination and we have set up the international donor co-ordination cell, which is well populated by United Kingdom forces, to make sure that we get the right equipment to the right people in time.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Does our ability to resupply the Ukrainians not depend on our having a robust defence industry? Does that not depend on both facilities and skilled manpower? And does that not depend on orders being placed in this country? Does this not absolutely demonstrate the folly of the Secretary of State's proposal to offshore the purchase of the fleet solid support ships to Spanish shipyards?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman never answered the question that I put to him at the Defence Committee. As he says, surely the most important thing is that whoever bids for these contracts commits to investing in skills in Britain. If they do not invest in skills, what is the point of awarding the contract? When I asked him whether he would choose someone who invested in skills, there was no answer from him. This is classic union-paid claptrap.

Armed Forces Recruitment

14. **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to recruit armed forces personnel. [902081]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr Andrew Murrison): We continue to apply an array of measures to support recruitment and retention and refine the armed forces' offer. These include financial incentives, flexible service, and an improved accommodation offer. A career in the armed forces provides all recruits with a wide range of opportunities to succeed. As one of the UK's largest apprenticeship providers, with over 80% of all recruits enrolling in apprenticeship programmes, we ensure that those recruits have the right skills to carry out their role throughout their career and into civilian life.

Duncan Baker: With war on the continent and a fragile peace in many parts of the world, our armed forces are more important than ever. My constituency of North Norfolk has a very proud military history, with a large number of veterans who care deeply about this. However, in the past 22 years, the inflow of personnel into UK regular forces has been higher than outflow in only six years. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that for the armed forces the retention of personnel, which he mentioned in his answer, is as important as the recruitment?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is right about this. Not recruiting is bad, but recruiting and then not retaining is even worse, for very obvious reasons. Defence recognises the need to improve matters, both for the regulars and the reserves, where the issue of inflow and outflow is pretty much the same. I have already this afternoon outlined a range of measures that are being put in place to improve retention, and I look forward very much to the Haythornthwaite review for incentivisation that we expect in the spring.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The very youngest recruits into the armed forces, the 16 and 17-year-olds, will attend the Army Foundation College in Harrogate. However, there have been very concerning reports that an instructor at the college has been charged with more than 20 offences, including at least five sexual assaults against 16-year-old girls. Can the Minister detail to Members here today how these young recruits will be properly safeguarded at the college?

Mr Speaker: I am just a little bit concerned about this. If somebody has been charged, we should not be mentioning them. It could be sub judice.

Carol Monaghan: The issue of safeguarding?

Mr Speaker: The general issue of safeguarding, yes.

Dr Murrison: I can assure the hon. Lady that the matter is under review. I cannot comment much further than that. I hope that that will satisfy her.

Topical Questions

T1. [902093] **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): First, let me pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) who served time on the Treasury Bench for the Department. They will be greatly missed, and I thank them for their effort and passion. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham will continue to hold the Department to account on women in the armed forces. Her report is incredibly important.

I wish to announce to the House the decision to accelerate the procurement of the Multi-Role Ocean Surveillance Ship. In the face of an illegal and unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine and Putin's reckless disregard for international arrangements designed to keep world order, it is right that we prioritise delivering capabilities that safeguard our national infrastructure. It is clear that effectively to address the current and future threats, we will now invest in MROSS ships that protect sensitive defence and civil infrastructure to improve our ability to detect threats to the seabed and to cables. I have also therefore directed the termination of the national flagship competition with immediate effect to bring forward the first MROSS in its place. I shall make further announcements on our continued naval investment in the coming weeks.

Neale Hanvey: Our whistleblower has alleged that staff from HM Naval Base Clyde were recently moved from building 201 in Coulport, where warheads are managed, to building 41 elsewhere, due to a serious radiation breach. Can the Minister advise me about the following? How many such events have been registered in the past three years? How many such incidents have been reported to the public? If he cannot do so, can he please set out why the people of Scotland, who are overwhelmingly opposed to weapons of mass destruction, are ignored by the Westminster parties, including his?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Member has read out a list of claims. I will be happy to write to him to answer those claims. I suspect the people of Scotland are now rather thankful they have a nuclear deterrent, in the face of a very provocative Putin.

T2. [902094] **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): I recently met Help for Heroes, and we spoke about the routine health assessment at the point of military discharge. Is there more that can be done at this point to pick up on mental health issues? It is a defining moment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr Andrew Murrison): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. Help for Heroes is one of our key charities, which I visited a while back in its premises near Salisbury, and I plan to meet it again very soon. It

is now mandatory for all armed forces personnel leaving the services to have a structured mental health assessment at their discharge medical examination. I am pleased to say that that will highlight any unknown mental health needs and enable signposting and referral where necessary, and my hon. Friend will of course be aware of Operation Courage within the national health service.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I welcome the Defence Secretary's news that the vanity project of the previous Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)—the flagship—will be scrapped, and the spending switched to purposes that will help defend the country. Ahead of the Chancellor's autumn statement, the Defence Secretary told the Select Committee last week

"I need money to protect me from inflation",

yet in the current spending settlement, Defence is the only Department with a real-terms cut in its revenue budget. Why did he ever agree to that?

Mr Wallace: First, on that particular question, the right hon. Gentleman will know that when I got my defence review—a year earlier than everyone else in the spending review—the figure for GDP inflation used by the Treasury was different from that used now. He will be aware that inflation has gone up since the basis of that calculation was made, which is why I said at the Select Committee that I would like to be insulated from that inflation. I will have my discussions with the Chancellor and the Prime Minister this week, and then we will see where we get to.

John Healey: When the Secretary of State agreed that budget, it was a £1.7 billion real-terms cut in the revenue budget. Now, he says that inflationary pressures on his budget for the next two years are about £8 billion. How much does Defence actually need from the Chancellor on the 17th to plug this budget black hole that has opened up on the Secretary of State's watch?

Mr Wallace: First, I do not agree with the premise that I agreed to a £1.6 billion reduction of the resource departmental expenditure limit. At the time, it would have reduced in the fourth year of its profile—it was a four-year profile, if the right hon. Gentleman remembers—but after a £24 billion increase, which is nothing that the Labour party has ever committed to. It would have shown a reduction in the last year, yes, but a real-terms freeze. However, inflation is significantly higher than it was all those years ago, and that is why I am going to see the Treasury, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister to see what I can get to make sure we protect our armed forces and our current plans from inflation.

T3. [902095] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): The recently announced defence accommodation strategy is worth £1.6 billion of investment, which will bring better facilities for our servicemen and women. Equally, it will create thousands of jobs across the United Kingdom. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that, notwithstanding the budget pressures, the strategy will still be proceeded with?

Dr Murrison: I am exceptionally grateful to my hon. Friend, who takes a close interest in these matters. Having spent four decades occupying pretty shoddy accommodation across the defence estate, it gives me great pleasure to say that the new strategy will definitely improve the quality of life of our personnel. The defence accommodation strategy commits to increasing the quality of homes, plus a fairer allocation process, and that will be game-changing. A safe, comfortable home is paramount to people's wellbeing, and these improvements will directly increase the quality of life for servicepeople.

T6. [902099] **Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): The scandal of the state of military accommodation continues with almost a third of UK military homes needing repair. Contracts worth £650 million were let six months ago to resolve that, but they have not worked. When will the Government bring these outsourced companies into line and repair the homes that our servicepeople are living in?

Dr Murrison: What is more important to servicepeople is the quality of homes that they occupy, rather than who runs them. I have to say that the value of the future defence infrastructure services contract is £2.9 billion, and that is just the core contract. That will sustain jobs across the UK and will most definitely improve the quality of the housing that members of our service community occupy. I hope that will come as some comfort to the hon. Member, because it represents a significant investment indeed.

T4. [902097] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State please join me in thanking the 3,500 NATO troops, many of them British, who took part in Exercise Iron Wolf II in Lithuania to defend our democratic freedoms against hostile foreign powers? Does he agree that the United Kingdom's future defence is best served by our continuing partnership with our NATO allies?

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heappey): My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I join him in congratulating all the UK troops and those from countries throughout NATO who participated in Exercise Iron Wolf in Lithuania. It has been fantastic to see over the past few months how much British soldiers, sailors and aviators are enjoying being part of the NATO alliance and getting to know those from other NATO countries. That alliance remains the cornerstone of UK and European security.

T7. [902100] **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What progress has been made to replicate the new method used by the Office for National Statistics for recording and reporting cases of suicide in the veteran community in Scotland and Northern Ireland?

Dr Murrison: I am glad the hon. Lady raised this issue. She will be aware that the ONS has worked closely with the Office for Veterans' Affairs so that for the first time we can record the number of servicepeople who have committed suicide. Her question gives me an opportunity to say that, although we are incredibly concerned about anybody who ends up in such a tragic situation—really, we are—it would be wrong to say that the statistics we currently have available suggest that the

service population is particularly at risk. There may, though, be some granularity within that, which I am keen to explore.

T5. [902098] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): Poland is one of our oldest allies and we will never forget the support of Polish fighter pilots, who saved so many British lives during the second world war. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State update the House on the steps he is taking to strengthen the alliance with Poland and help to modernise its armed forces?

Mr Wallace: Poland is one of our oldest allies—we have been allies for more than 150 years—and we currently have a squadron of Challenger 2 tanks and a squadron of Light Dragoons light reconnaissance based in that country. Over the past three years I have worked incredibly closely with my Polish counterparts, including by sending a squadron of Royal Engineers to help at the time of the Belarusian migrant crisis. I recently visited again to sign a multibillion-pound deal with Poland on medium-range air defence. There are also the beginnings of an agreement on the Arrowhead Type 31 shipbuilding.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Figures from the MOD show that more than half of veterans rate their experience of the armed forces compensation scheme as one out of 10. Last week, I and my co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on veterans—the hon. Members for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), for Bracknell (James Sunderland) and for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord)—launched a survey to enable those affected to share their experiences of the compensation scheme. Will the Minister agree to meet us when that survey concludes?

Dr Murrison: I would be most happy to meet the hon. Lady.

T8. [902102] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): Last week the Russian ambassador to the UK toured the studios saying that the UK was involved in various nefarious plans. He also purported to have handed in to the embassy a report saying that the UK had been up to no good. What are the Secretary of State's comments on this? Has he seen that information? What does the evidence from the Russians show?

Mr Wallace: In recent days, Russia has made a range of allegations against the UK and other international partners that are clearly designed to distract from the attention on Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. I did indeed receive a letter from the Russians that seemed to demonstrate everything that has been announced by the Government either in this House or in the media going way back to the times of Op Orbital. As yet, I still await the groundbreaking evidence, but I do not expect it to come because we know for sure that Russia is involved in misinformation.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is the right thing to do to refresh the integrated review. The Minister said earlier that he was not ruling anything in or out from a capability point of view, but does he agree that it would be wise not to make any cuts to capability until the integrated review refresh reports, hopefully before Christmas?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman knows that there are lots of types of capabilities: there are numbers, there is equipment that is going out of service to be replaced by other equipment, and there is modernisation. We will look at all that in the round. I know that the hon. Gentleman takes particular interest in the A400 and C-130 fleet; I am glad to tell him that I have brought forward by more than two years the ability for people to parachute from the A400 at significant scale, at both high and low altitude. I hope we will have good news by next year. The availability of the A400 fleet is now increasing.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): Campaigns and equipment rely on people, and people need to be at the centre of future defence planning. However, last week there was an urgent question on conduct towards women in the Royal Navy. The urgent priority to address unacceptable behaviour and culture has been stretched to a five-year vision, so will the Secretary of State give further reassurances that service personnel will be at the heart of the integrated review and defence Command Paper refresh?

Mr Wallace: First, let me say how grateful I am to my hon. Friend for the time and effort she gave, even before she entered the Department. She will be a loss to the Department. If I had more Ministers, I would desperately have liked her to have remained to continue her work on women in the armed forces. Like her, I know that there is urgency. We are working at pace. We have already introduced some secondary legislation. We are going to set up soon all the things promised in our report, and I would be delighted if she would like to accompany me on any of those steps.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State will be aware that in March 2020 Russian reconnaissance bombers entered the Rathlin sector of UK airspace. Six Typhoons had to be scrambled in order to escort those reconnaissance bombers out of our airspace. Given the likelihood of an anti-NATO Government being elected in the Republic of Ireland, and given that the UK Government had to seek Republic of Ireland support to enter its airspace in order to escort those bombers out, what actions will the Secretary of State take to ensure that a proper assessment is made of these national security interests?

James Heapey: We have an excellent relationship with the Irish Government on security matters. It is clearly not for me, at the Dispatch Box of the UK Parliament, to talk about Irish policy over the use of its airspace. The hon. Gentleman will know, however, that RAF jets have deployed into Irish airspace on occasion. It is for the Irish Government to set out their policy on why, when and how.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): The armed forces are a major employer across Lincolnshire—so much so that it is the ambition of the Greater Lincolnshire local enterprise partnership to become a nationally recognised cluster of innovation-focused defence companies, and to ensure that Greater Lincolnshire and Lincoln are a highly attractive first-choice destination for defence-related industries, service leaders and their families. Will Ministers assure me that Lincolnshire, including busy

RAF Waddington, which now has the Red Arrows on base in my constituency, will continue to be a key area for defence investment?

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Alex Chalk): I reassure my hon. Friend that Greater Lincolnshire continues to be a major investment hub for the MOD and the wider defence industry. RAF Waddington is one of the RAF's busiest locations and will remain a base for the foreseeable future. I very much welcome the creation this year of the Greater Lincolnshire Defence and Security Network.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): Do the Government recognise that while the practice of double-counting spending towards the targets for overseas development assistance and for NATO defence might be a neat trick, it is a false economy?

James Heapey: Maybe, but we have not accounted any money against ODA in the MOD thus far this year.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Recently I met Richard Morgan from 65 Degrees North, a charity that seeks to help in the rehabilitation of wounded, injured and sick service personnel and veterans by giving them the opportunity to participate in challenging adventure. Do Ministers agree that there is a need to change the perception of physical and mental disabilities through this spirit of adventure, and will they congratulate the charity on the work it does?

Dr Murrison: I most certainly do congratulate it on the work it does. I am very positive about disability in the armed forces. I point the hon. Lady to the diversity and inclusion strategy, which sets out the blueprint for how we can do much better. I would be more than happy to meet the charity that she has cited, and I congratulate it on the work it does.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Tobias Ellwood.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): The defence Command Paper states:

“China poses a complex, systemic challenge.”

But we recently learned that RAF veterans have been lured to China to assist with its own air force training, and today's response to my written parliamentary question confirms that Chinese officer cadets have recently been attending courses at Sandhurst, Shrivenham and Cranwell. Will the Secretary of State confirm that we will update our security strategy towards China, and will the law be changed to prevent former RAF pilots from being recruited by the Chinese military?

James Heapey: It is a couple of days since I signed off the response to my right hon. Friend's question, but from memory it related to a few years ago, albeit within the five that his question referred to. We have since revised our policy on Chinese attendance on key courses, but it is important to note that in none of those courses is anything taught or compromised that might be above the threshold of the Official Secrets Act.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In this remembrance period, does the Minister recall the two very constructive meetings held by the War Widows' Association with our hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot

(Leo Docherty), when he was veterans Minister, about the 200 to 300 people who lost their widow's pension on remarriage? Will the progress made towards an ex gratia payment for that small cohort now be rapidly brought to a conclusion?

Dr Murrison: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. I am acutely aware of the position of the pre-2015 war widows. The Treasury is absolutely against retrospection, and that has been the case over consecutive Governments. Ex gratia payments, however, are a different matter. I cannot give any commitments, but I can tell my right hon. Friend that the matter is under active consideration.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): On Friday, I had the honour of visiting the brand-new specialist veterans orthopaedic centre at the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital near Oswestry. It is going to be a world-class facility built to provide NHS care for veterans across the UK, as well as working with military charities to provide other support. Will the

Secretary of State join me in congratulating staff there on their achievement and agree to consider extending such centres across the UK?

Mr Wallace: The marrying-up over the years between the MOD, the health service and the charities has gone from strength to strength. The example that the hon. Lady has used is something that we should embrace and do more of.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the integrated review refresh include consideration of the resilience of the RAF's main operating bases, particularly when it comes to dispersal?

James Heapey: As my hon. Friend knows well, although the RAF's main operating bases are incredible centres of excellence for the aircraft they operate, there do indeed need to be well rehearsed plans for dispersing the Air Force across civilian airfields around the country. The RAF is developing and refining those plans as we speak.

Asylum Seekers Accommodation and Safeguarding

Mr Speaker: I understand that there is a prospect of legal proceedings in relation to the centre at Manston. In any event, given the national importance of the issues raised by this case, I am allowing Members to discuss those issues. However, I ask Members not to discuss the details of any legal proceedings that might get under way.

3.36 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for Immigration if he will make a statement about what steps he is taking to reduce overcrowding at the Manston asylum processing facility and about the safeguarding of minors, both at Manston and in hotels.

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): We have set out on multiple occasions that the global migration crisis is placing unprecedented strain on our asylum system. Despite what they may have been told by many, migrants who travel through safe countries should not put their lives at risk by making the dangerous and illegal journey to the United Kingdom. We are steadfast in our determination to tackle those gaming the system and will use every tool at our disposal to deter illegal migration and disrupt the business model of people smugglers.

So far this year, our French colleagues have prevented over 29,000 crossings and destroyed over 1,000 boats. Furthermore, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be speaking with President Macron this week about how, together, we can achieve our shared ambition to prevent further crossings.

Some 40,000 people have crossed the channel on small boats so far this year, and the Government continue to have a statutory responsibility to provide safe and secure accommodation for asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute. To meet that responsibility, we have had to keep people for longer than we would have liked at our processing facility at Manston, but we have been sourcing more bed spaces with local authorities and in contingency accommodation such as hotels.

I can tell the House that, as of 8 o'clock this morning, the population at the Manston facility was back below 1,600. That is a significant reduction from this point last week, with over 2,300 people having been placed in onward accommodation. I thank my Border Force officers, members of the armed forces, our contractors and Home Office staff, who have worked tirelessly to help achieve that reduction.

Before the high number of arrivals in September, Manston had proven to be a streamlined and efficient asylum processing centre, where biographic and biometric details are taken and assessed against our databases, asylum claims registered and the vulnerable assessed. We are determined to ensure that Manston is back to that position as soon as possible, and I am encouraged by the progress now being made. We must not be complacent. We remain absolutely focused on addressing these complex issues so that we can deliver a fair and effective asylum system that works in the interests of the British people.

Sir Roger Gale: First, may I thank my right hon. Friend for the endeavours that he has made since his appointment to reduce the numbers of people overcrowding the Manston facility? I believe that this problem was wholly avoidable. He has worked tirelessly, with the staff at Manston—I thank them too—who have done a superb job under very difficult circumstances.

We are now nearly back to where we need to be, with the Manston processing centre operating efficiently. Will my right hon. Friend confirm his understanding, shared with the Home Secretary and with me last Thursday when she visited the site, that Manston is a processing centre, not an accommodation centre? Does he therefore agree that the temporary facilities that were erected while he and I were both present there a week ago on Sunday will be demolished, and can he confirm that additional accommodation will be provided so that the spike in November that is anticipated—which will happen, as it happened last year—will be catered for so that we will not have a repetition of the clogging-up of the facilities at Manston?

Robert Jenrick: First, may I praise my right hon. Friend, who is an exemplary Member of Parliament? It has been my privilege to work alongside him over the past 10 days. He has consistently raised concerns expressed by his constituents, and also our joint desire that Manston should operate as a humane and decent facility that provides compassionate care to those who arrive at the United Kingdom's borders. The population is now back at an acceptable level, which is a considerable achievement. It is essential that it remains so, and he is right to say that the challenge is far from over. Last year, for various reasons, November proved to be the largest month of the year for arrivals in the UK, so we have to be aware of that and plan appropriately. We are doing just that, and we are ensuring that there is now further accommodation so that we can build up a sufficient buffer, so that those arriving at Manston stay there for the legal period of 24 hours or thereabouts, and are then swiftly moved to better and more appropriate accommodation elsewhere in the country.

I support my right hon. Friend's view that Manston should always be a processing centre, not a permanent home for migrants arriving in the UK. I have taken note of his comment that he would like the temporary facilities there to be dismantled. I do not think that is possible right now, because the prudent thing is to ensure that we maintain the level of infrastructure that we have in case there is a significant increase in the number of migrants arriving in the weeks ahead, but it is certainly not my intention, or the Home Secretary's intention, that Manston is turned into a permanent site for housing immigrants.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Stephen Kinnock.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his place. The Home Secretary has stated that after 12 years of Conservative government the asylum system is "broken". We agree, and it is the Conservative party that has broken it. The Government are processing just half the number of asylum claims that they were processing in 2015, and as a result the British taxpayer is footing a £7 million hotel bill every single day. Their failure to replace the Dublin agreement

[Stephen Kinnock]

on returning failed asylum seekers, their failure to crack down on the criminal gangs, and their failure to get agreement with France have also increased the backlog.

This catalogue of chaos has led to the overcrowding in Manston, for which the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) has directly blamed the Home Secretary. The previous Home Secretary revealed today that on 20 October he received legal advice that Manston was

“being used, or in danger of being used, as a detention centre”, and he took emergency measures to work within the law. However, the current Home Secretary met officials on 19 October, just before she was forced to resign for breaching the ministerial code. Can the Minister please confirm that the Home Secretary refused to take those same emergency measures, and can he explain why she ignored the advice that she was repeatedly given over a period of several weeks? The Home Secretary told the House just a week ago that she did not ignore legal advice. Can the Minister tell the House now whether he believes that statement to be correct? The key question on Manston is whether legal advice was followed or not. Given the Minister’s unlawful approval of a Tory donor’s housing project in his previous brief, is he really best placed to make that judgment?

We know that 222 children have gone missing from asylum accommodation. What are the Government doing to find those missing children, to prevent more children from going missing, and to meet their legal obligations to vulnerable children?

Robert Jenrick: For a few moments I thought that the hon. Gentleman was going to approach this in an intelligent and constructive manner, but sadly that was the triumph of optimism over experience. In fact, the Labour party is trying to politicise this, and we can of course say the same. The Labour party has no plan to tackle illegal immigration. It does not want to tackle illegal immigration. The Labour party left a system in ruins in 2010, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) would attest, as he had to help to pick up the pieces. We believe in a system of secure borders and a fair and robust asylum system in which all members of the public can have confidence.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Home Secretary’s conduct. Let me tell him that my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary has consistently approved hotel accommodation. More than 30 hotels have been brought on line in the time for which my right hon. and learned Friend has been in office, which has ensured that thousands of asylum seekers have been able to move on from the Manston site and into better and more sustainable accommodation. And look at her record over the course of the last week! The population at Manston has fallen from 4,000 to 1,600 in a matter of seven days. That is a very considerable achievement on the part of the Home Secretary and her officials in the Home Office, and I am proud of it.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): The Minister will be well aware that previous student accommodation at Canterbury Christchurch University—86 rooms—has been taken up by a company called Clearsprings, one of

many outsourced companies around the country that have been trying to find accommodation. He may also be aware that Thanet District Council had been in correspondence with the Home Office in August, saying how unsuitable the site would be because of its close proximity to both primary and secondary schools that were a few hundred yards away, and because it was in a residential area.

Is it not the case that outsourced companies such as Clearsprings and Serco are simply running roughshod over planning consents, local authorities and local consultation? I am very concerned about this example. The Home Office must get involved when these large sites are selected, rather than big outsourced companies just doing as they please.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend and I were in contact about this issue over the weekend, and I know how strongly he feels. My first duty has been to ensure that Manston can operate in a legal and decent manner, and we are well on the way to achieving that. The second task is ensuring that the Home Office and its contractors procure accommodation—whether it be hotels, spot bookings or other forms of accommodation—in a sensible manner, taking into account many of the factors that my hon. Friend has just described, such as safeguarding, the impact on the local community and the likelihood of disorder, whether there is already significant pressure on that community, and whether it is a tourist hotspot. Those criteria need to be followed carefully.

My third priority, beyond that, is our exit from this hotel strategy altogether. It is not sustainable for the country to be spending billions of pounds a year on hotels. We now need to move rapidly to a point at which individuals are processed swiftly so that the backlog in cases falls and we disperse people fairly around the UK to local authority and private rented sector accommodation where appropriate. We also need to look into whether other, larger sites that provide decent but not luxurious accommodation might be available, so that we do not create a further pull factor for people to come to the UK.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP Spokesperson, Stuart C. McDonald

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) on securing this urgent question and on his persistent scrutiny of these issues. Surely we have now reached the point where the Home Office can no longer be left responsible for the safety of those children. Hundreds are missing and thousands more are stuck in hotels outside the child protection system. Children are reportedly pressurised to claim to be adults and are increasingly misidentified as adults. There have been harrowing accounts of assault and rape; there is general evidence of fear and depression; and adults are not even being properly disclosure checked. Can we have a cross-Government taskforce, headed by the Prime Minister, to get children into local authority care instead of into more hotels?

Progress in moving people out of Manston is welcome, but it massively begs the question why that was not possible last month. To help the Minister to free up accommodation, will he prioritise the outstanding claims of the 15,000 or so Syrians and Afghans, who should be comparatively easy to identify as refugees and to award

their status? Will he suspend the pointless process that saw staff identify just 83 inadmissible claims out of 16,000 cases? For goodness' sake, instead of wasting their time on that, they should be looking at asylum claims and the backlog.

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman is wrong to suggest that the UK Government pressurise any individual to falsely identify as a child. It is the people smugglers who do that; we are doing everything we can to clamp down on it. I have been to Western Jet Foil at Dover to meet the Border Force staff who try to make those assessments. At times, up to 20% of the adult males who arrive at Western Jet Foil claim to be under 18, when clearly the number is substantially less than that. We have already changed the law, which I think the SNP voted against, to change the way in which those tests are administered, and if we need to make further legal changes, we will.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is wrong that many children, in particular unaccompanied children, are in hotel accommodation. I want to change that. The way to do that is to encourage more local authorities throughout the United Kingdom to accept those individuals and to help them into private or state foster parenting arrangements. We have put in place a significant financial package of about £52,000 a year per foster carer per child to ensure that can happen, plus a £6,000 up-front payment to the local authority to help to accommodate that. The financing is available, so I want to ensure that more local authorities step up. If he can encourage those run by his SNP colleagues in Scotland to do so, I would be happy to support him.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): The question for my right hon. Friend is not how many hotels we can book, but how we can stop the increasing number of migrants coming across the channel this year. We have seen more than 10,000 adult males from Albania aged 18 to 40—that is between 1% and 2% of the population—coming to the United Kingdom. We will not have enough hotels in the country if they continue at that rate. What is his view on the agreement that was entered into on 18 November 2002 between the German and Albanian Governments, which allowed Germany to deport Albanians who did not arrive in the country with a valid residence permit? That would allow us to take quick action to take people out of the country who should not be here.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. We want our asylum system to be available to those who truly need it—those who are fleeing persecution, war and human rights abuses around the world. We should not be a harbour for those who are essentially economic migrants coming from safe countries such as Albania. We need to change that. We have now negotiated a return agreement with Albania and 1,000 Albanians have already been returned home under that. I now want to see—I know my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary shares my view—a fast track whereby Albanians who do not meet our asylum criteria have their cases processed quickly and are swiftly returned home. It cannot be right that we are seeing thousands of Albanians making this crossing and essentially taking advantage of the welcome and hospitality afforded to them here in the UK.

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

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) on securing this urgent question. Tomorrow, the Home Affairs Committee will visit Manston on its second visit, as we first visited in June. Alongside looking at the overcrowding, the safety issues and the lack of basic facilities, there is a concern about the legality of the Home Secretary's actions in authorising individuals to be detained at Manston for more than 24 hours. Weekend media reports suggested that she was repeatedly provided with the advice that detaining individuals at Manston for more than 24 hours was illegal. *The Sunday Times* reported that she had received papers on 4 October stating that the Home Office had no power to detain people solely for welfare reasons or for arranging onward accommodation. Can the Minister explain to the House the legal basis for detaining individuals at Manston for longer than 24 hours?

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, who chairs the Select Committee, for that question. The law is clear that we should not detain individuals at sites such as Manston for longer than 24 hours, and that is exactly the position that we want to return to as fast as we can.

There are competing legal duties on Ministers. Another legal duty that we need to pay heed to is our duty not to leave individuals destitute. It would be wrong for the Home Office to allow individuals who had only recently arrived in the United Kingdom—the vast majority of those at Manston had been saved at sea by Border Force, the Royal National Lifeboat Institute and the Royal Navy—and who had been brought to the site in a condition of some destitution, to be released on to the rural lanes of Kent without great care. That is why the Home Secretary has balanced her duties and taken the required steps to procure more hotel accommodation as swiftly as we can. The right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) can see the work that we have already done.

In answer to the first part of the right hon. Lady's question, the conditions at Manston were poor because there were too many people there, but a wide range of facilities are provided: individuals are clothed, they are fed three times a day, and there is an excellent medical facility. I have seen those things with my own eyes, and I hope that she sees them as well. We need to keep a sense of proportion about the state of Manston.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Now then. When I hear talk of sourcing housing and getting extra hotel spaces for illegal immigrants, it leaves a bitter taste in my throat. Five thousand people in Ashfield want to secure council housing but cannot get it, yet we are debating this nonsense once again. When are we going to stop blaming the French, the European convention on human rights and the lefty lawyers? The blame lies in this place right now. When are we going to grow a backbone and do the right thing by sending them straight back the same day?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is right that in sourcing accommodation for migrants, we should be guided both by our common desire for decency, because those are our values, and by hard-headed common sense. It is

[*Robert Jenrick*]

not right that migrants are put up in three or four-star hotels at exorbitant cost to the United Kingdom taxpayer, or that migrants who come here illegally are given preference of any sort over British citizens. That is the kind of approach that we will take going forward.

We will now work closely with our allies in France to ensure that more crossings are stopped in northern France. The Prime Minister will speak with President Macron this week while they are in Egypt, and we hope to take forward that partnership productively and constructively in the months ahead.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The second half of this urgent question was explicitly about the safeguarding of accompanied minors in the hotels. That matters because there are thousands of children—verified children—in those hotels. Last week, we learned that two of them—one a child under the age of 13—were sexually assaulted in a hotel in Walthamstow, and more cases of sexual assaults on children in these hotels have since come to light. We are all clear that those who committed those crimes must be held responsible. We all have duties to those children, just as we have to any other child under state protection.

When I asked the Home Secretary about this, she made a cheap jibe about hotels. The Minister did not even mention those children in his response. He has not yet given us a straight answer. Surely all of us in the House will be concerned about the sexual assault of children of any background. Will the Minister publish the details of all these cases, including how many incidents of violence or sexual assault against children in these hotels have occurred in the past year, what action has been taken, and crucially, what safeguarding the private companies that run these hotels must undertake? If he will not publish those details, that tells us what he thinks about those children and the responsibility that we all have to them.

Robert Jenrick: It is a pity the hon. Lady takes that approach because I take my responsibilities to children, whether accompanied or otherwise, very seriously. We have put in place a wide range of support mechanisms. I mentioned earlier the work we are doing for unaccompanied children. The hotels, most of which are in Kent, have extremely sophisticated support. It is costing the taxpayer up to £500 a night for that accommodation, which gives her a sense of the degree of the support we are making available. The best thing she could do is to support her local authority and encourage others to take more unaccompanied children and families into good-quality local authority accommodation, or to find them foster care in the community. That is the task because we need to disperse these individuals as fast as we can across the country. She may shake her head, but I am afraid that suggests she does not understand that the way to resolve this issue is to help the children out of hotels and into the community as fast as we can.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I am looking forward to my second visit to Manston tomorrow with the Home Affairs Committee. I am glad that the Minister has managed to get the numbers down at Manston. That is really important, but it strikes me that all we are doing is moving a problem from Manston into our

communities. To solve this issue, we need to get through the backlogs, allow our communities to rest, and stop creating an environment where the far right can take root in constituencies such as mine and those of colleagues around the House. With that in mind, what measures is my right hon. Friend taking to surge Home Office processing capacity, so we can actually deal with the problem at the heart of this issue?

Robert Jenrick: It is essential that we accelerate decision making now within the Home Office. Over the summer, we piloted an approach that would very substantially increase decision making. That has been done in our Leeds office and we now intend to roll it out across the country as quickly as we can. That would take us from an average of around 1.5 decisions per caseworker per week to as many as four per week. We also want, in slightly longer time, to review all the red tape and bureaucracy that surround the process, so we can ensure our system is more streamlined, and to look at why, in the UK, we have a much higher approval rate for asylum than many comparable countries, such as France and Germany. That, at the heart of the issue, is why so many people choose to come here. They shop around for asylum and choose the UK when they are, in fact, economic migrants.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The House welcomes the fact that the numbers at Manston have gone down, but the Minister will be aware that the concerns, notably of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, David Neal, were about not just the numbers but the conditions. When he came to give evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, he told us that he thought there was a risk of fire, disorder and infection. Is the Minister confident that those risks no longer exist? On unaccompanied children, how many are there in Manston? What effort is being made to safeguard them? For instance, are they having to sleep next to males they do not know? When it comes to unaccompanied children in hotels, can he tell the House specifically how they are being safeguarded?

Robert Jenrick: There should be no unaccompanied children at Manston. Unaccompanied children are taken directly from Western Jet Foil. In some cases when they immediately arrive at Manston, they are taken to specialist hotels, where they are looked after with a range of support provided for them. As I said in answer to a previous question, that in itself is not a desirable outcome. We want to ensure that those young people are quickly taken to better accommodation, particularly foster carers. That relies on us being able to find more. There is a national shortage of foster carers, which is why we put in place a financial package to try to stimulate the market and encourage more people and councils to step up and provide that service.

The right hon. Lady makes an important point about conditions at the site. Conditions were poor when I last visited, but the primary reason for that was the sheer number of individuals there. The staff I met were providing a very good quality of care in difficult circumstances. The food was acceptable, and the health and medical facility was good. The clothing and other support that was provided was something I thought was acceptable and is certainly far in excess of that which would be provided in other European countries.

We have to remember that the individuals who arrive at Manston have literally been hooked out of the sea. We saved their lives just hours previously and many of them have come from significantly worse accommodation such as, for example, the camp at Dunkirk. I am not saying the UK should compare itself with that—we want to be better—but I think the right hon. Lady will find that the facility at Manston is now in a significantly better state and I would be interested in hearing her reflections when she returns.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): As my right hon. Friend is aware, his Department is housing 400 asylum seekers in two hotels in my constituency, sited 50 metres apart on a busy motorway junction. With no basic amenities nearby or extra resources for local services such as healthcare and policing, their location is wholly unsuitable and I fear could lead to significant safeguarding issues. Ahead of our meeting tomorrow, which I thank him for, will he put together a timetable for their closure and in the meantime ensure that Erewash gets extra support to manage the situation on the ground?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend was swift to raise this matter with me as soon as it was brought to her attention. She has raised the issues she has mentioned on the Floor of the House today with me and my officials, and I look forward to meeting her tomorrow to take that forward. As I said in answer to an earlier question, the hotels are not a sustainable answer. We want to ensure that we exit the hotels as quickly as possible and to do that we will need to disperse individuals to other forms of accommodation. We may need to take some larger sites to provide decent but basic accommodation. Of course, we will need to get through the backlog, so that we can get more people out of the system either by returning them to their home country, or granting them asylum so they can begin to make a contribution to the UK.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): We welcome the Minister's assurances that decisions will be made more quickly, particularly since 89,000 people in the system have been waiting more than six months for a decision, but can he assure us that these will not just be box-ticking exercises, that not speed but efficiency will be the determining factor and that people will get a fair decision? We all want to see an end to this problem and everything the Government have done so far has just made it worse.

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Member has my assurance that the standards of decision making will be upheld, but we believe we can do it in a far more productive manner than has been done in the past, and if we can make more decisions every week than we do today, we will get through the backlog as quickly as we can.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Government legislate urgently to deal with the obvious loopholes in the law that are exploited by people smugglers and economic migrants? And I share the concerns of my colleagues about the use of hotels in my area.

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary and I are reviewing whether further changes to the law are required. One area we are particularly

interested in is the modern slavery framework. That is important and well-meant legislation, but unfortunately it is being abused by a very large number of migrants today, and if we need to make changes to it so that we can ensure that it is not exploited, we will do so.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Like many other Members, I have hotels in my constituency where a number of families are living in really bad conditions. The Minister outlined that he wants to look at moving people away from those hotels. One of the key problems is the fact that asylum claims are not being processed enough. Has there been any additional recruitment within the Home Office to look at the backlog of cases?

Robert Jenrick: Yes, there has. We have now recruited 1,000 caseworkers and we have a plan to recruit a further 500. Those individuals will be trained by the very best decision makers, such as those who have been through the pilot, which I mentioned earlier, in Leeds. Together, this new workforce hopefully will be able to power through the backlog and ensure that decisions are made swiftly.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend assure me that steps are being taken to rapidly address the speed at which asylum claims are being processed before we run out of hotels? The economies of remote coastal towns such as Ilfracombe and Newquay rely on their tourists. Can he assure me that those hotels will welcome visitors in next spring's vital tourism season?

Robert Jenrick: I certainly hope that is the case. As I said, my first priority was to ensure that Manston was operating in a legally compliant and decent manner. The second priority is to ensure that, where we are using hotels, we are doing so judiciously and that officials or our contractors are applying the criteria that I and other Ministers have set down, one of which is to ensure that we avoid tourist hotspots such as that which my hon. Friend represents. Thirdly, it is essential that we exit the hotels altogether and move forward with a more sustainable strategy that ensures best value for money for the taxpayer and a fair and robust asylum system.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Will the Minister confirm that to seek asylum is a perfectly legal thing within international law and, therefore, UK law and that loose use of the words "illegal asylum seekers" is dangerous for the individuals concerned?

Has the Minister's attention been drawn to the Council of Europe report on pushbacks across Europe of people seeking a place of safety in a number of countries, including this one? They have been pushed back and left in places of enormous danger. Will he confirm that Britain will not be involved in sea-bound pushbacks towards France that leave people in enormous danger? Instead, will he recognise the humanitarian needs of, frankly, deeply desperate people to whom we should be holding out the hand of friendship, not condemnation?

Robert Jenrick: The UK is not involved in pushbacks at sea; we uphold our international obligations in that respect. It is a right for an individual to claim asylum. We want a system whereby those who are fleeing genuine persecution, war or human rights abuses can find refuge in the United Kingdom. The issue that we are grappling

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with is the sheer quantity of individuals who are choosing to come here, leaving other safe countries such as France. That places an intolerable strain on our system and means that those individuals to whom we want to offer support find themselves in difficult circumstances.

A fair and robust system would not encourage people to come across the channel illegally in small boats. It would be predominantly based on resettlement schemes such as the ones that we have engineered in recent years for people from Syria, Ukraine and Afghanistan. That is the system that I want to build in the years ahead.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): On Thursday, I was notified by the Home Office that the Fir Grove Hotel in Grappenhall would become an asylum centre the following day. There was no discussion with the borough council and no notification to local residents. It is in the middle of a residential area, fewer than 200 yards from a primary school. I am sure that my right hon. Friend would agree that it is simply not acceptable for the Home Office to steamroll ahead with such a decision without the necessary consultation with local residents. I would be grateful if he would meet me to discuss that situation and how we can review and reverse that decision.

Robert Jenrick: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend so we can discuss the issue and he can represent the views of his constituents. I can inform the House that I have agreed with my officials at the Home Office that, as a matter of course, all Members of Parliament should be informed of new facilities being opened in their constituency ahead of time. All local authorities should be informed and proper engagement undertaken with them so that we can better understand the specific issues and provide the support that might be needed. It is not right that MPs and councils find out on social media or third hand and I intend to bring that to an end.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Some are heralding the horrors at Manston as the death of compassionate conservatism. The rest of us knew it never existed, or at least not for a very long time. Since the last Prime Minister took office just weeks ago, we have seen the Home Secretary describe people fleeing war as invading our country. Lethal levels of overcrowding at the Manston camp, traumatised people dumped at Victoria station with nowhere to sleep and child refugees sexually assaulted—is that the compassion that the Prime Minister speaks of? If not, how will those shameful examples be rectified?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady should pay closer attention to what is actually happening. I have visited Manston and met members of staff who are supporting those individuals at Western Jet Foil. I spent Saturday night at our immigration removal centre in west London, and in every one of those situations Border Force, Home Office, military and other personnel are providing decent, compassionate care to individuals who are coming to this country. But humanity and decency does not mean naivety, and that is where we take a different approach from the hon. Lady. Some 30% of those who have crossed the channel this year alone have come

from Albania, which is a demonstrably safe country. We have to draw a distinction, or else we simply will not be able to help people who do deserve our care and support.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I was concerned to learn from media reports last week that not once but twice, asylum seekers from the Manston centre were dropped off at Victoria coach station in my constituency. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must deal with asylum seekers responsibly, firmly and compassionately, and can he assure me that we will not see a repeat of what we saw last week?

Robert Jenrick: I thank my hon. Friend, who raised this issue with me immediately when it came to her attention, just as I did with officials when I learned of it. We have in recent times occasionally used a procedure whereby asylum seekers are asked whether they have a home of a friend or relative where they could stay, and if that is the case, they are bailed to that address. On balance that is the right approach, because it ensures that the taxpayer does not have to pay for them to stay in hotels, but we must get it right. In this case it appears that a small number of individuals were left at Victoria station due to a miscommunication. They were later taken to hotels, in Norfolk I believe, and are being cared for appropriately.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): My constituency hosts some of the hotels that are currently housing refugees and asylum seekers, and I have dealt with a number of cases specifically regarding the conditions there. Earlier, the Minister described such hotels as “luxurious”, and I have to ask whether he has ever been to one and seen what I have seen, which is whole families living in cramped conditions, given food so bad that it makes them sick, and having to deal with infestations of bedbugs and other things that are making them ill. These hotels are dire. They are not secure or safe, and they are certainly not suitable for vulnerable children. Will the Minister admit that the Home Office has received a number of complaints about that, and agree to review and assess conditions in those hotels?

Robert Jenrick: If the hon. Lady has specific allegations, I suggest she brings those to me and I will happily look into them. I have visited hotels, and in general I have been reassured that they meet the right standard of decency. As I said earlier, it is not appropriate that we are putting up asylum seekers in luxurious hotels, and numerous examples in the press of accommodation that is not appropriate have been brought to my attention since I took this role. We have to respect the taxpayer and ensure that we put up asylum seekers in sensible accommodation. Decency is important and will be a watchword for us, but deterrence must also be suffused through our approach. We do not want to create a further pull factor for individuals to make that perilous crossing across the channel, and we must make the UK significantly less attractive to illegal immigration than our EU neighbours.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Much has been made of the safeguarding of illegal migrants, which I think all Members of the House would agree with, but we are not talking about the safeguarding of our citizens. Thousands of people are coming here and we do not know their backgrounds. My right hon. Friend is being

forced to put them into hotels because there is nowhere else for them to go. What guarantee can he give to all our citizens who live near those hotels that they will be safe, particularly when we hear what is going on in those hotels?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and for that reason I went with my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) to meet her constituents on Friday morning. They have been at the sharp end of illegal migration, and it is important that we think not just of the migrants but of our own citizens who are facing pressures from this situation. I reassure my hon. Friend that on arrival we screen individuals coming into the UK. Counter-terrorism police are present at all our facilities in Dover and Manston, and they take action against those about whom they might have suspicions. When we choose hotels or accommodation, it is important that we do so judiciously, so that we do not place people in situations that might have safeguarding or other risks. Again, that is another reason why we need to move away from the hotel model altogether.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): My recent written parliamentary question revealed that 220 children have gone missing from Home Office-procured accommodation. We hear reports from across the country of the difficulty in securing school places for children in Home Office accommodation. Now we hear reports of the most grave matter—sexual assaults against children living in Home Office accommodation, at least one of whom I believe to be in Home Office accommodation in my constituency. I have previously raised safeguarding concerns about that accommodation and received a response from the Home Office that can be described only as dismissive and disinterested. When will the Minister accept that the Home Office is failing in the duty of the British state to vulnerable children on these shores, and when will he take steps to address this terrible situation?

Robert Jenrick: If the hon. Lady has specific and, what sound like, serious allegations, I would be very happy to look into them for her. As I said in answer to the question of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), the key thing is for each and every one of us who cares about this issue to go back to our local authorities and to encourage them to take more children into their care, otherwise those children will remain in hotels for far too long.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know of my deep unease about the use of a hotel in Ashford, which has been opened recently, as part of the dispersal from Manston, so I was pleased to hear him say that he wants to exit from hotel use altogether. That would be a welcome step forward. In the transition period before he can achieve that, will he ensure that the Home Office takes more account in the future than it has in the past of the relative level of pressure on public services, such as health and education, in different parts of the country of coping with extra demand from asylum seekers? In particular, the pressure has been greater in Kent than in other parts of the country, and I hope that the Home Office system can recognise that, so that we get a proper and fair dispersal around the country.

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend makes a number of important points. Part of our plan to exit the hotels is to ensure a fair dispersal around the country. That means every local authority in all parts of the United Kingdom stepping up and playing its part. If we do that then no area should be disproportionately affected. My right hon. Friend represents an area that has borne the greatest burden, and it is absolutely right that we work together to find ways to alleviate the pressure on Kent wherever we can. He and I are meeting Kent local authority leaders later in the week to hear their concerns. If there are ways in which we can support them, I will certainly do everything I can to achieve that.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Can the Minister explain what discussions have been held with the Children's Commissioner regarding this Government's staggering levels of child neglect? Can he also say why the commissioner has not been encouraged to use her statutory powers to visit Manston and the hotels concerned to speak directly with the children there?

Robert Jenrick: It is up to the Children's Commissioner to determine her own schedule. As far as I am aware, she has not requested to visit Manston. I have no objection to her doing so, but that is entirely a matter for her.

I object to the suggestion that the UK Government are being inhumane towards children. These are children who are coming across the channel against our best wishes. They are coming either with their families who are choosing to put them through this uniquely perilous journey, or, in some cases, unaccompanied. We are doing everything we can to support them when they arrive here. Of course it is a difficult challenge—how could it be easy for the Government to help hundreds of unaccompanied children who arrive by sea and who then require foster care and support? It was always going to be a difficult challenge. We see that in our own constituencies when we hear of the shortage of foster care, or concerns about local authority accommodation for young people. This is a national issue that is exacerbated by the sheer quantity of young people who are coming across in this way.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): The Home Office is accommodating 400 asylum seekers in the Metropole Hotel in the centre of Blackpool in my constituency. It lies in Clarendon, the fourth most deprived ward in the country—an area with a host of social problems and a difficult history of child sexual exploitation. Those problems were pointed out by me and the council when the hotel was first commissioned by the Home Office. Those issues have not changed, and dispersal from the hotel has been slow. I welcome the fact that the Minister is going to exit the strategy of using hotels, but will he make sure that the Metropole is the first hotel that he exits?

Robert Jenrick: Having worked with my hon. Friend on a range of issues, I know how deeply and thoughtfully he addresses the issues in Blackpool. I appreciate that Blackpool is one of the areas that has borne a disproportionate burden from this issue for a long time, so if there is a way to ensure that individuals are dispersed from Blackpool more swiftly than from other parts of the country, I am happy to look into that. As I

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said, my objective is that we exit the hotels and get people into more sustainable accommodation. That requires, in part, other local authorities to step up and play a greater role in accommodating people rather than relying time and again on our largest cities, Kent and a small number of other local authorities, such as Blackpool.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The unsafe conditions and overcrowding at Manston have been totally unacceptable, but the serious allegations of assault on our children are beyond unacceptable. We also learned last week that people seeking asylum were dropped off in Victoria, London. We know that the Home Secretary is out of her depth and failing on this, but will the Minister say how many children were left unaccompanied last week? More importantly, given the scale of the crisis, is it not time that we had an independent investigation that can look into this serious issue and robustly report back on the ongoing challenges that face the Home Office?

Robert Jenrick: As far as I am aware, the small group of individuals who were left at Victoria station were all adults. There were no children, but I will happily stand corrected and write to the hon. Lady if I am mistaken. Unaccompanied children are coming to the country and we are doing everything that we can to support them. Again, I take issue with what has been said, because the accommodation, medical care and support that we are providing to these individuals is decent, humane and far surpasses that provided by comparable European countries. We have to ensure that deterrence is suffused through our system or we will only encourage more people to make the perilous journey across to the UK and continue to make the UK a magnet for illegal immigration. That is not what we Government Members would want to see.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This whole situation is a farce. There were recent reports that illegal migrants were being put up in a luxury rural hotel—a former stately home near Grantham—that normally charges £400 a night. Surely the easier and quicker that we make this whole process, the more people will come, especially since it is a complete pushover, with a large number of young Albanian men claiming modern slavery, which is ridiculous. Will the Minister confirm that the solution is to repeal the Human Rights Act, get out of the European refugee convention and repeal the Modern Slavery Act 2015, so that people can be detained when they arrive for being involved in an illegal activity and then deported?

Robert Jenrick: I, too, was disturbed to see images of the Stoke Rochford Hall Hotel, which is a luxurious setting and not the kind of hotel in which we want to see individuals being accommodated. We want to see decent but commonsensical treatment that does not create a further pull factor to the UK. The Home Secretary and I will review whether further changes are required. We start from the basic principle that treaties that the UK Government have entered into must work in the best interests of the British people.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Contrary to some of the dangerous, disgusting, dog-whistle, right-wing rhetoric emanating from some members of the Conservative party, asylum seekers are people and we should judge ourselves on how we treat our fellow man. In that regard, the Minister will be aware that many people in hotels in Aberdeen have been in that situation for well in excess of a year, waiting for their asylum applications to be processed. When can we expect that particular issue to be resolved?

Robert Jenrick: As I said in answer to an earlier question, we are working hard now to accelerate decision making so that individuals can either be granted asylum or be removed from the country. I would say, however, that there is a marked trend in the data showing that some Scottish local authorities are taking a disproportionately low number of asylum seekers in every respect, so the first useful thing that the hon. Gentleman could do would be to go back to the local authorities that are controlled by the Scottish National party in Scotland and ask them to step up.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): The town of Stocksbridge in my constituency is awaiting final confirmation of £24 million of Government funding through our town deal. That £24 million will be a transformational sum for Stocksbridge, but it equates to just four days of taxpayer expenditure on hotel accommodation for people who have arrived illegally in the UK. Does my right hon. Friend agree that as well as being a complex security and humanitarian issue both for the public and for genuine asylum seekers, the small boats crisis also represents a serious financial issue in these difficult economic times? Can he expand on his previous answer about how the Government will move away from the expensive hotel model?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend and I have spent many happy hours in Stocksbridge and I want to see the Government investing even more in her community. She is right to say that it is an unconscionable waste of taxpayers' money to be spending over £2 billion per year on hotel accommodation. That money could be put to better use, whether helping her constituents or fulfilling our broader mission as a country to support those in distress who truly need it at home or abroad. The approach that the Home Secretary and I are going to take is to speed up decision making so that we can get people out of hotels because their application has been decided, to disperse people more fairly and evenly across the country, to see whether better value sites are available to us, and of course to do everything we can to dissuade people from making the journey in the first place.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I was not quite clear what the Minister meant in his response earlier to the Chair of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). Is it his position that the Government acted legally in detaining migrants at Manston for more than 24 hours?

Robert Jenrick: The Government's objective is to ensure that nobody stays at Manston for more than 24 hours, but we have to balance up competing legal duties. We also have to be cognisant of the fact that not

everything is within our control when we deal with this situation. It was clearly not within the control of the Home Office that thousands of individuals chose to get into small boats and cross the channel in a very short series of days, and it was certainly not within our control that an individual chose to attack the Western Jet Foil on Saturday, ensuring that 700 to 800 people were brought swiftly to the Manston site as a result. These are the difficult choices that we have to balance. There are no simple choices or solutions in the Home Office, but we have to act in the public interest.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Our former Labour colleague Chris Mullin is one of the most thoughtful left-wingers I know. Would the Minister take a moment or two to have a look at his article in the press today and commend it to people on both sides of the House, given that even he feels it necessary to conclude that

“uncontrolled migration risks bringing down our fragile social systems. It is also driving politics across Europe into the hands of the extremist Right?”

Surely we have to recognise when the asylum system is being abused. If Chris Mullin can recognise it, so should people on both sides of this House.

Robert Jenrick: I read the former Member’s article in *The Daily Telegraph*, and he made a number of important points. Above all, he made the point that public concern about the level of migration to this country—in particular, illegal immigration—is very high and has continued to be high in recent years. If we are to be democrats, we have to listen to that and take action accordingly. We on this side of the House believe in secure borders and controlled migration, and we are concerned about the straining of community tensions and the fabric of communities if we do not take action accordingly. The wise words from Chris Mullin are ones that the Home Secretary and I will certainly heed.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I wish to raise the situation in Harmondsworth detention centre in my constituency after the events at the weekend. I am grateful to the Minister for the call that we had over the weekend. My understanding from what he told me yesterday is that Harmondsworth has now been decanted. My fear is that once the renovations have taken place it will soon be filled again, because in this country we detain too many people who have engaged in no criminal activity. We detain too many for too long—unjustly, I believe, and often brutally. May I suggest that, as well as sorting out the processing situation, one way of tackling this issue would be to ensure that we have an enforceable limit on how long people are trapped in the process of assessment and on how long people can be detained in our detention centres?

Robert Jenrick: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for those suggestions; I will bear them in mind. I respectfully disagree about whether those individuals who are destined to be removed from the UK, particularly foreign national offenders, should be in institutions such as the immigration removal centre in his constituency. I appreciate that that that is not all of them.

May I take the opportunity that the right hon. Gentleman’s question gives me to thank his constituents, the immigration enforcement officers, the prison officers and all those who responded heroically to the disturbance

over the weekend? I am pleased to say that it has now been brought under control, that all the inmates at the site have been decanted to other IRCs, and that the contractor will be making the necessary improvements to the site as quickly as possible so that it can get back up and running and we can ensure that the situation does not happen again.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): My constituents are becoming sick and tired of this ridiculous narrative of economic migrants somehow being mistreated at Manston. The fact of the matter is that after a short time at the processing centre, these economic migrants will receive free food and free accommodation in hotels—something that my constituents, who are paying for all this, can only dream of. How does the Minister think my constituents who cannot get an NHS dentist, a GP appointment or a council house feel about the fact that we are spending £2 billion a year on hotel bills because we cannot be bothered to solve this issue?

Robert Jenrick: It is important that we recognise what the United Kingdom is actually doing. The vast majority of those who arrive at Manston have literally had their life saved by the UK. The Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Border Force and the Royal Navy have ensured that as many as 95% of those individuals are saved at sea, brought to land, given clothes, food and medical support and then processed at Manston until they can be accommodated elsewhere. We should be clear about how we are meeting our obligations as a country—in fact, we are going far beyond our neighbours. My hon. Friend is right, though, that those standards of decency and humanity must be matched by hard-headed common sense. We should not be accommodating individuals for long periods in expensive hotels.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In an exchange last week relating to the situation at Manston, the Home Secretary told the House:

“I have never ignored legal advice.”—[*Official Report*, 31 October 2022; Vol. 721, c. 639.]

Has the Minister been briefed, seen any information in his Department or been told by any colleagues any information that would show that that was not a correct statement to this House?

Robert Jenrick: I have no reason to believe that the Home Secretary has misled the House. The Home Secretary was advised that we needed to procure more hotels, and we have procured more hotels—dozens of further hotels, so that thousands of migrants were able to leave Manston over the course of this week alone. That is exactly the right approach.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): This issue is important to my Guildford constituents and important to me. Does my right hon. Friend agree that by controlling illegal immigration we can ensure that we have the capacity and the facilities to offer safe and legal routes for vulnerable people across the world, as we have done for people in Ukraine, Hong Kong, Syria and Afghanistan?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The work that has been done over the past year by this Government, supported by local authorities and tens of thousands of our fellow citizens, to help people from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Hong Kong and elsewhere to

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find safety and, in some cases, a new life in the UK is something of which we should all be proud. Our system should be based on safe resettlement schemes, rather than individuals crossing the channel illegally in small boats.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers to the questions, which are difficult and complex. Tensions are rising as the temperatures are dropping in the United Kingdom, and the Government are intending to pay out large amounts of money for heating, but I am concerned that ill feeling towards migrants is growing as people mistake legal asylum-seeking for illegal immigration. Will the Minister outline how his Department intends to ensure that those who have no right to be in this country are treated with respect and care, but will not be allowed to overstay beyond that which is fair, equitable and enshrined in law?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the UK wants to be a big-hearted country that welcomes those in need to our shores, but we must ensure that those who come here illegally for economic migration or other purposes are removed as swiftly as possible, because it brings the whole system into disrepute and makes it impossible for us to treat people who deserve our care in the way that we would want to see. At the moment, the system is frankly overwhelmed by the sheer number of individuals coming here, a very large proportion of whom should not come here, because they are economic migrants.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): One of the locations hosting migrants in my constituency is the Fownes Hotel, and notwithstanding the fact that I expressed concerns about its suitability, I was particularly concerned to hear from my council about a number of children being taken into care from that location. My right hon. Friend mentioned an incentive package for councils. I was told that such practice is putting an additional burden on an already overburdened children's care system. Will he discuss with officials how to ensure that even when the children were not supposed to be at a particular location, support flows through to councils? The impression I have been left with by Worcestershire is that it is trying to do the right thing, but either was not aware of or was not receiving that support.

Robert Jenrick: I will certainly ensure that local authorities are better communicated with about the location of children to their area and the support that the Government are making available. I am holding a teleconference later this week with all local authority chief executives and leaders to listen to their views and to advise them of our steps. On the back of that, if we need to make changes to our processes, I will certainly try my best to do so.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Inhumane centres and overcrowded, let alone unsafe hotels are no place to put these very vulnerable families. In light of the success of the Homes for Ukraine scheme, why will the Home Office Minister not undertake to have a homes for refugees and asylum seekers scheme, so that people can be settled in communities, supported and kept safe?

Robert Jenrick: There is already a community sponsorship scheme available for community groups that want to bring refugees to the United Kingdom and care for them appropriately. I would like to see more community groups take part in that, and if there are ways in which we can simplify it and ensure its success, I would be happy to do so. The hon. Lady mentions the Homes for Ukraine scheme, which I personally feel passionately about. That is now facing some challenges, because a number of individuals are coming up to the end of their six-month process, and we need to encourage more families to come forward and take them in. I am working with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to establish a rematching service, so that we can ensure that those families are properly looked after.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I appreciate the challenge that my right hon. Friend and the Department are facing, but we can solve the problem of accommodation by stopping illegal entry into this country in the first place. Therefore, will he please, on behalf of my very frustrated constituents, leave no stone unturned in finding a solution to this problem and stopping illegal entry?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is right that we have been debating the symptoms of the problem today, rather than the cause, which is the sheer quantity of individuals crossing the channel illegally. We will tackle that on multiple fronts, whether through the National Crime Agency and our security and policing resources ensuring that we bear down on the criminal gangs, by gathering the best possible intelligence on the continent diplomatically with France, Albania and other partner countries, or ensuring that how we treat people in this country, while decent and appropriate, does not produce a further draw to the UK. Ensuring that deterrence suffuses our approach is extremely important.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): It is worth reiterating that seeking asylum is not illegal, but if the Government really want to save a little bit of money, why do they not extend the right to work to people who are seeking asylum? If they did so, those people would become more self-sufficient, and could find and pay for their own accommodation. They could ease the massive labour shortages facing the country and they could pay tax to the Exchequer.

Robert Jenrick: I have listened carefully to the arguments on both sides of that issue. I appreciate that colleagues will respectfully disagree with me, but it is extremely important that we do not create further pull factors to the UK, which is arguably a more attractive destination for illegal migration than our European neighbours. There is a wide range of reasons for that, but I do not want to create any further pull factors that will only make this situation worse.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): My Redditch constituents are generous and compassionate, and have opened their hearts and homes to refugees from countries around the world. However, they find it deeply illogical, infuriating and completely unfair to see these small boats arriving on our southern shores. Every sovereign nation should have the right to control its borders, but we are seeing that it is possible for an Albanian male,

under our modern slavery legislation, to become a confirmed victim of modern slavery. That is not what this world-leading and compassionate legislative framework was set up to achieve. It has rescued many vulnerable people from awful situations, so when will the Minister introduce a review of that legislation to make sure that it is fit for purpose and can do what it is intended to do, rather than being a fast-track route for Albanian males?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend has spoken on this on a number of occasions, and she draws on her own experience at the Home Office and elsewhere. She is right that modern slavery laws, while important and well meant, are now being abused, particularly by males who are here for economic migration purposes. We have seen many cases in which young males from countries such as Albania, as she says, have their asylum claims processed. Those claims are rejected, quite rightly, so then they immediately make a claim under modern slavery laws. That is wrong, and we intend to review it, as she says, and make any changes that we need to make.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): What the Minister said to my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, and what the Home Secretary told the House last week balanced breaking the law by leaving asylum seekers in Manston for weeks against breaking the law by abandoning them on the streets without means, and then—Victoria station aside—they decided to commit the first piece of law breaking. Will the Minister publish the advice that led him to that unusual legal opinion?

Robert Jenrick: It is not the convention for the Government to publish legal advice, but I have made it clear today and in other public appearances that it is absolutely essential that Manston, like other sites, operates within the law. In this case, that means ensuring that individuals are treated decently and humanely there and stay for 24 hours unless there are exceptional reasons to the contrary. In this case, it was right that the Home Secretary balanced that among wider concerns to leave individuals destitute. It was also the case that this is a site that took at short notice large numbers of migrants who crossed the channel illegally, which put huge pressure on our facilities there. We also had to deal with the aftermath of what is now being treated as a terrorist incident, which led to 700 individuals being evacuated to the site. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we have made huge progress over the course of the week. We are now at the right level of capacity and we are working to ensure that individuals do not stay there any longer than 24 hours.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): It is extremely disappointing that we continue to see the Home Office pursuing hotels in Stoke-on-Trent, particularly given the concerns that we have raised about the risks associated with doing so and the fact that more than 800 refugees have already been resettled in Stoke-on-Trent. Will my right hon. Friend look at measures to ensure that other parts of the country that have done little to nothing to help to provide accommodation are told to do so?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the burden of migrants in hotel and other accommodation has historically been borne by our

cities, and that Stoke has disproportionately borne a significant quantity of migrants. We have now tried to disperse individuals more broadly, and some of the issues that we have heard about today are a result of migrants being placed in hotels in locations where that would not previously have happened, so it is a new issue for those local authorities to cope with. We need to ensure that we provide the right support to those local authorities. We now have a dispersal strategy to encourage individuals to be placed more fairly across the country, which we hope should in time provide a fairer settlement for places such as Stoke-on-Trent.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): If the dispersal strategy is to be successful, local authorities must be engaged in a conversation before they are told what is happening in their own local authority. That way, we can ensure that the correct support, services and funding are in place. Otherwise, does the Minister not just risk fuelling the increasing intolerance and bigotry?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman is right. My first priority was to ensure that the Manston site was operating legally and appropriately, which meant that the Home Office had to procure accommodation at pace. We are now moving into the next phase, which will involve ensuring that we have better communication and engagement with local authorities, so that we can hear their concerns; that we provide them with the support that they might need; and that we choose locations together that meet sensible criteria in terms of safeguarding, community cohesion and the availability of public services. It is also extremely important that we work closely with local authorities on issues such as child protection and the appropriate dispersal of children and families across the country.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): We have heard about international law and how we cannot break it, and about the European convention on human rights, but in 2005 and ever since, we chose to ignore the ECHR and an EU diktat requiring us to give people in prison the vote. In other words, we ignored international law because we respected our people's wishes. Why can Italy and other EU nations do the same today, and we do not, when it comes to foreign criminal gangs and people smugglers arising from illegal immigration? Why do we not protect our borders and our people?

Robert Jenrick: We will do everything in our power to protect our borders. I have already set out that we will do that on a number of fronts, including through law enforcement and robustly tackling the criminal gangs on the continent. We will also do it through better diplomatic relations with our nearest allies, such as France; my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is having one of those conversations this week with President Macron. We will work with countries such as Albania that are demonstrably safe and where economic migrants in particular should be returned swiftly. If further legal changes are required, we will consider making them, because treaties to which the UK is a signatory should work in the best interests of the British people.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): Many people will have tuned into their TVs yesterday to see people living in tents and eating food that many would find vomit-inducing—not in Australia, but elsewhere in

[Brendan Clarke-Smith]

mainland Europe. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is therefore insulting to hear the Opposition say that the accommodation and hospitality offered by this country is not good enough? Many of my constituents would be grateful to be afforded such luxury.

Robert Jenrick: We should treat individuals coming to the UK with decency; those are our values. My hon. Friend is right to say that the standard to which we look after those arriving on our shores, in almost every case, easily surpasses that of other countries. We only have to compare the standards of Manston, which I have seen in the last week, with those of the camp in Dunkirk to see the difference. We should be proud of the way we support individuals coming to the UK—that is the British way—but we should do so in a common-sensical way that looks after the best interests and value for money of the British taxpayer.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): It was not too long ago that the Opposition brought forward a motion to oppose the use of Napier barracks for illegal immigrants, but I would much rather have that than the use of the Novotel in the centre of Ipswich, where 20 constituents' jobs have been lost as a result. Ultimately, however, does the Minister agree that the Rwanda policy is the right policy that will create one of the most powerful deterrent effects? Can he give me some clarity about when that is likely to be implemented and how the new Bill of Rights could help to bring it to fruition?

Robert Jenrick: As I have said in answer to many questions this afternoon, deterrence has to be suffused through our entire approach so that we do not make the UK a draw for illegal migration. The Rwanda policy is one element of that, and it would produce a significant deterrent effect. It is currently subject to legal action—we expect to hear more on that shortly—but as soon as we are able to proceed with it, my hon. Friend can be assured that we will do so.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that in order to stop the flow of people across the channel, we need to do two things? First, we need proper legitimate routes for people to claim asylum before they arrive in the UK, and we should also prioritise those who come here with community sponsors who can help them, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) has suggested, which we have already done for 100,000 Ukrainians. Secondly, we need to ensure that if people break into this country,

they are not able to live here or to work, but will be detained and deported, and if we need to change our laws or, indeed, the terms of our membership of the ECHR, we should do that.

Robert Jenrick: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the good work he did at the Department for Levelling Up in helping to establish the Homes for Ukraine scheme. That scheme established the principles that he has set out, which I think would be a better way forward for our asylum system, whereby asylum to this country would be predominantly through resettlement schemes like those for Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine. Individuals came here through safe and legal routes, enabling the UK to prioritise those truly endangered, and ensure that those who come here illegally—for example, in small boats—find it more difficult to find safe harbour here and are returned to their home country.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): During my brief tenure this summer as the Minister for tackling illegal migration, I visited Manston. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the staff working at Manston deserve our praise for the excellent care and attention they give in their work, particularly as it often takes place in very challenging circumstances?

Robert Jenrick: I thank my hon. Friend for his important short service commission this summer. We are very grateful for the work he did. He is right to say that the staff at Manston have behaved heroically. I was hugely impressed by the Border Force officers I met, the contractors, the cooks, the armed forces personnel and my Home Office officials. They have moved heaven and earth over the course of the past week to ensure that that site is returned to a safe and legal method of operation. They have always treated people with great care and courtesy, and we should all be proud of that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for responding to the urgent question and answering questions for one hour and 20 minutes.

RETAINED EU LAW (REVOCATION AND REFORM) BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the Order of 25 October (Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill: Programme) be varied as follows: In paragraph (2) of the Order (conclusion of proceedings in Public Bill Committee) for “Tuesday 22 November” substitute “Tuesday 29 November”.—
(Michael Gove.)

Question agreed to.

Social Housing (Regulation) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

[Relevant Documents: First Report of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, The Regulation of Social Housing, HC 18; First Special Report of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, The Regulation of Social Housing: Regulators' responses to the Committee's First Report, HC 824.]

4.58 pm

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Social Housing (Regulation) Bill, which was, of course, first introduced in the other place, is one of a number of steps that the Government have taken in the aftermath of the dreadful tragedy that occurred at Grenfell in 2017. Everyone in the House was shocked by what happened on that night, when 72 people lost their lives in one of the most horrific civilian tragedies that has ever occurred in these islands. The suffering of the victims of that tragedy is almost impossible to relate, and the testimony, forbearance and endurance of the survivors and the bereaved, of relatives and residents, is very much in all our minds as we consider how we can appropriately learn lessons from the tragedy, put right what went wrong and ensure at last that those who suffered receive justice.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State back to his position. I say that because I think he did make some progress on the cladding issue when he was Secretary of State previously. He will be aware that there are still no personal evacuation plans for disabled people, although the former-former Prime Minister confirmed that the Government would take up all the recommendations of the Grenfell inquiry. Will the Secretary of State please look at that?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who, as well as doing fantastic work on the Select Committee in trying to ensure that appropriate progress has been made on matters such as building safety, has been a very effective advocate for her constituents in this regard. Let me emphasise that in the wake of the Grenfell tragedy the Government have to undertake a significant body of work, and the hon. Lady is right to hold us to account for the speed with which we do it. There is work that needs to be done on building safety overall. We have introduced legislation—the Fire Safety Act 2021 and the Building Safety Act 2022—in order to take forward some of the recommendations that were already being generated by the inquiry, and indeed in some cases we did not have to wait for those recommendations to know that we needed to act.

The hon. Lady mentioned a very important factor: the personal evacuation plans. Again, this is a difficult and sensitive question. A number of those affected by the Grenfell tragedy were individuals living with disabilities. It is critical to ensure that the correct regime is in place for those individuals so that they are safe in the homes in which they live—and they deserve to be safe—and also to ensure that were disaster to strike, the fire and rescue services would be able to ensure they could be evacuated safely.

I have heard some of the concerns expressed by residents and others about the Home Office's response to recommendations on personal evacuation plans. I think it important for me to work with the new Home Office Minister dealing with this issue—the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Miss Dines)—in order to ensure that we listen to what residents have said and, I hope, do better. Listening to what residents have said is critical to our whole approach to what happened in Grenfell, and to broader concerns about the quality of social housing and the safety of those in social housing that that tragedy underlined our need to act on.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I am more than happy to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), who did so much to put these things right when he was a Minister. I will give way to everyone else in due course.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It was an absolute privilege to work with the Secretary of State and to be tasked with converting the Social Housing White Paper into the robust legislation that we see before us today. Having listened to the podcast on the Grenfell Tower inquiry, may I ask whether the Secretary of State agrees that one of the overriding ambitions of the Bill is to ensure that social housing tenants are treated with respect at all times, and that we remove any stigma that is associated with such tenure?

Michael Gove: As ever, my hon. Friend is 100% spot-on. Even before the Grenfell tragedy, it was clear that the way in which tenants were being treated in social housing in far too many cases, and—it pains me to say this—particularly in Kensington, was simply not good enough. We have vivid documentary evidence of the fact that the tenant management organisation that was responsible for the refurbishment of Grenfell simply did not listen to tenants and behaved in a high-handed fashion. Their safety was not given the importance it deserved. A number of residents, including Ed Daffarn of Grenfell United, a survivor of that night, were very clear about the risks that were being run, but they were not listened to. One of the most powerful lessons of the tragedy is the need for us to ensure that social housing tenants feel that their voice is being heard. As my hon. Friend for Walsall North said, any high-handed and aloof behaviour exhibited by some towards people who are the most deserving of our protection should end, and I hope that it will.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State back to his position. May I return briefly to the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) about personal evacuation plans for disabled people? As the Secretary of State knows, the Home Office did not expect that recommendation. Is it his view that those plans should be in place for disabled people living in high-rise blocks?

Michael Gove: We do need to look again at the position. I have to be careful because the Home Office is a separate Department and I am not the Secretary of State there, but I do know that the new Home Secretary and the new Minister responsible for fire safety appreciate

[*Michael Gove*]

and understand the need to look closely at the concerns that tenants expressed on the previous position. I have to say that the previous position was taken in good faith, but we need to pay attention to the concerns expressed.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am sure that we all want social landlords, and indeed all landlords, to be held to account when they fall short. Does the Secretary of State accept that there may be a problem with some financial penalties? We may end up punishing tenants twice: once for having a bad landlord and again by having funds withheld. I can give a specific example from my constituency. A social landlord is failing financially so is penalised by not being able to bid for the building safety fund, with the consequence either that fire safety works do not get done, or that properties are not sold or developed and new properties are not built. Will he look at that specific instance and see whether we can avoid penalising tenants in that way?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes the fair point that there are lots of pressures on registered social landlords and housing associations. The Bill is there to ensure that all emulate the best, but I appreciate that with pressures to increase supply, pressures on building safety and pressures to deal with the poor-quality stock that many have inherited, we need to be sensitive. I am sure that the regulator will be, in the application of any fines, if the correct action is not being taken.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State and welcome him back to his position; I look forward to his significant contribution to this issue. Obviously it is good for lessons to be learned, but it is also good to share them. Northern Ireland does not have the same number of high-rise apartment blocks as London or elsewhere across the United Kingdom, but we have some—Housing Executive, housing association and some private. Has the Secretary of State on his return been able to share the information about better safety with all the regions, particularly Northern Ireland?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. This legislation applies to housing associations and social landlords in England, of course, but in my other role as Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, I have talked to Ministers and officials in the devolved Administrations about some of these building safety questions. We all have a shared interest in getting those right. Of course we respect the nature of devolved competence, but we also want to make sure that some of the insights, particularly about how we deal with developers, can be operationalised UK-wide.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Post what the Secretary of State rightly described as the absolute tragedy of Grenfell, if he were to be presented in this debate this evening with evidence that a housing association continues to take a complacent attitude to the fire safety of its tenants, would he regard that as a very serious matter indeed?

Michael Gove: I certainly would. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that housing associations and other social landlords have to take safety incredibly seriously.

This legislation is intended to ensure that they do. If housing associations or other social landlords are not taking safety, and particularly fire safety, seriously, I would be most grateful if he and others would share such information with me. He has been a uniquely assiduous constituency MP and his concern for the vulnerable and voiceless is such that he will raise his voice on their behalf. We will do everything we can to act.

Before going on to the meat of the Bill, I should say that, as a number of Members have rightly pointed out, a range of issues need to be tackled in the wake of the Grenfell tragedy. As well as legislating on building safety, we need to make sure that there is action, particularly from some of those with direct responsibility for fixing the problems that they helped to create. I am grateful to the two Secretaries of State who succeeded and preceded me here, my right hon. Friends the Members for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke). In office, both accelerated the efforts we were undertaking to ensure that developers who were responsible for buildings that were not safe accept the responsibility for remediating those buildings.

There have been some indications from some speaking apparently on behalf of developers that, because of the global economic headwinds we are all facing—there may be an impact on supply; there may be an impact on their bottom line—they feel that the weight of obligation that has been placed on their shoulders should perhaps be lessened somewhat. Let me make clear from the Dispatch Box that it cannot be the case that economic conditions, which affect us all, are being used by developers, or anyone else, to shuffle off their obligations.

Similarly, there are freeholders who have direct responsibility to the leaseholders in the buildings they ultimately own to remediate those buildings—that is their legal obligation. This Parliament passed laws to ensure that they fulfil that obligation. There are some freeholders—organisations of significant means—that are, again, trying to delay or dilute their responsibilities. That is simply not acceptable. I hope that across the House we make it clear that, yes, these are tough economic times, but they are very tough economic times for the most vulnerable in our society, and there is no way that plc's and other organisations with healthy balance sheets and surpluses, and CEOs who are earning handsome remuneration, can somehow use global economic conditions as an excuse for shuffling off their responsibility. That just will not do. All of us across the House will work to ensure that the work of remediation is done and that there will be no hiding place for those responsible.

In bringing forward the Bill, I want to thank, first of all, all colleagues in the other place who contributed to improving it while it was there. I am sure that in Committee there may well be amendments from Back-Bench colleagues across the House that can contribute to improving it. My colleagues in the other place were grateful to those noble colleagues who contributed to the enhancement of the Bill. In particular, I want to thank Lord Greenhalgh, who, as building safety and fire safety Minister, introduced the Bill and served with such distinction in the Department.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North for all the work he did, and not just on this Bill but on legislation on the private rented sector and on homelessness. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member

for Newark (Robert Jenrick) for his work, when Secretary of State, on the White Paper that preceded the Bill. In particular, I also want to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). Her actions in the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell tragedy, along with the moral leadership she has shown, set in train a programme of reform to ensure that those in social housing got the full attention of the Government. That has ensured the Bill is before us today.

I also want to thank two campaigners who, in the course of the last year, have shone a light on some of the worst conditions in social housing, and have reminded us all how important it is to ensure that our regulator has teeth. First, Kwajo Tweneboa is a young man who I think all of us in this House have seen campaigning with eloquence and passion. Having grown up in social housing, he has acted as a voice for those who may have been overlooked and underserved in the past. Secondly, Daniel Hewitt for ITV News has worked with Kwajo and others to ensure that registered social landlords who have not been performing their duties adequately are held up to proper scrutiny.

It is of course important to acknowledge that there are a number of different aspects of the social housing debate that the Bill does not cover. It does not cover the whole question of future supply. We will have an opportunity to debate that in this House in the weeks and months to come. It is also important to stress that the overwhelming majority of those who work in social housing are doing a fantastic job. The overwhelming majority of those who work in housing associations and in all the arm's length management organisations that help to provide social housing are dedicated professionals. They have nothing to fear from the Bill and, indeed, everything to gain. It is the case, however, that some 13% of homes in the social rented sector do not meet the decent homes standard, and that is simply too high a figure. We need to make sure action is taken to deal with that. I should say, by contrast, that the proportion of homes in the private rented sector estimated not to meet that standard is 21%, which is why legislation to improve conditions in the private sector is so important and, again, the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North and others has been so critical.

A series of steps are taken in the Bill to ensure that we can more effectively regulate the sector. First, the Bill makes sure that what has been called the serious detriment test no longer applies. In the past, a very high bar had to be met before the regulator could investigate complaints. We are removing that test, lowering the bar and making it easier for tenants to feel that their concerns are being investigated.

The second significant measure is that we are ensuring that the cap on fines under which the regulator hitherto operated—just £5,000—is lifted so that unlimited fines can be levied. I know that the regulator will take account of the comments made by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and others to ensure that fines are targeted and proportionate, but the potential for the regulator to levy unlimited fines will concentrate minds as few other things will for some of the significant players in the sector that need to up their game.

We will also shorten to two days the period of time for inspections, which was hitherto four weeks, to ensure that tenants who have concerns can feel that they are being addressed more quickly. We will require performance improvement plans from housing associations and others

that are found wanting. Critically, safety will become a fundamental objective for registered social landlords and a named individual in each RSL will be responsible for health and safety, thereby making sure there is clearer accountability where it has been fudged in the past.

Thanks to amendments tabled in the House of Lords, we are introducing a new standard for competence for people who work in the field. There has been a lively and important debate about the need for higher professional standards in housing. I completely agree; evidence from what happened in the run-up to Grenfell showed that some of those who were responsible for safeguarding and improving social housing did not have the basic standards of professionalism that are required.

We need to proceed with sensitivity, because the standard of qualification and degree of professional training required for someone at the heart of a major registered social landlord may of course be different from that for someone who is operating a small alms house or other charity provider, but there is a clear need for greater professionalisation. We will work with colleagues to ensure that we have fit-for-purpose legislation.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Secretary of State for his comprehensive speech. It has become apparent from things we read in the paper and from television programmes that some of the councils responsible for enforcement in respect of safety in properties are finding themselves financially stretched to deal with the massive issues that come their way. Does the Bill provide some help, whether by financial or other means, to ensure that councils can deal with the enormous issues that they have to deal with? I can understand why they are sometimes overwhelmed.

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Indeed, local authorities have in the past been found wanting when it comes to building control. The most recent spending review included significant additional sums for local government, but we are all aware that inflation and other pressures are putting considerable strain on local government finances. It is my commitment to work with local government, particularly in England but, of course, throughout the United Kingdom, to make sure that the most vital statutory functions can be well funded. I will of course work with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and others to make sure that we can provide the support that is required.

The legislation will make sure that the voice of tenants is more effectively placed at the heart of regulation and policy making overall. The establishment of an advisory panel will draw widely to ensure that the regulator and the Department understand the concerns of social tenants. Indeed, the regulator will be in the vanguard of a greater level of transparency in respect of the level of service provided by individual social landlords.

Legislation on its own can achieve a lot but not everything, and I am conscious that my Department has a responsibility, as Grenfell United and others have pointed out, to make sure that there is wider awareness of the power, and path, for complaints. I am glad that there has been greater awareness of the way in which complaints can be made, that those complaints are being acted on more quickly, and that registered social landlords such as Clarion, which have been on the receiving end of complaints, have responded more quickly.

[*Michael Gove*]

My Department has been responsible for making sure that there is a wider awareness of how to deal sensitively with examples of anti-social behaviour. It continues to work with local government and with registered social landlords—alongside the work of the ombudsman—to ensure that there is a better appreciation of what tenants require.

The legislation was originally conceived of, generated and brought forward by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead as one of a number of measures to ensure that we do right by the bereaved, the survivors and the relatives of those in the Grenfell tragedy, but there is still much to do. I am very conscious that more than five years on from that tragedy, work is still in progress and we need to expedite it, but I know that the inquiry, which formally concludes this week, will be in a position—thanks to the testimony of so many brave people—to hold us and future Governments to account.

Across the House, the spirit in which we will take the legislation forward and examine it in Committee will be one of commitment to honour the memory of those who lost their lives and of a determination to ensure, “Never again”.

5.21 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): May I be the first to welcome the right hon. Gentleman back to his place. I very much enjoyed sparring with him over the Dispatch Box last time. I also particularly enjoy these very rare moments when the House can come together in political consensus to deliver on something of enormous importance to people outside this place. I look forward to working with him and the team to make good on the promises that we made to people all those years ago.

Apparently, when the right hon. Gentleman arrived back in the Department, he told civil servants that he was getting the band back together. The Department has now had seven line-ups since the Bill was first promised—amazingly, that is officially more reinventions than the Sugababes. I look forward to us going “Round Round” again. The Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), is shaking her head. I gather that she is a Taylor Swift fan, so I promise her that I will try to get some Taylor Swift references in next time.

The Secretary of State will know that since he last held office, the job has got much harder, but the Bill, which the Labour party strongly supports, has got much better, in large part thanks to Baroness Hayman and our colleagues in the other place, who have worked together in genuine cross-party spirit to strengthen the hand of social housing tenants.

For 120 years, social housing has provided the foundations of a decent, secure life for millions of people across Britain—a home for life, handed back into common ownership to be passed down through the generations. Labour believes that that is part of our inheritance and an ideal—one that empowers people to live the richer, larger and more dignified lives that they deserve—worth fighting for.

It should, then, shame a nation that in 2020 one in seven social homes in London, along with many others across the country, do not even meet the Government’s

decent homes standard. As the Secretary of State knows—he paid tribute to the incredible work of Dan Hewitt at ITV—the reality is one of children growing up in squalid, damp and overcrowded homes that would not be out of place in the Victorian era.

When people in social housing have tried to sound the alarm, they have too often been completely ignored. Nothing has brought that into sharper relief than the appalling tragedy at Grenfell Tower and the treatment of the residents who—along with many others—tried to sound the alarm over many, many years. Today, we remember the 72 people who lost their lives on that day, and those whose lives were changed for ever and who live with those memories. We pay tribute to the work that they have done to get us this far. But they want more than remembrance; they want justice and a lasting legacy. That includes setting right a system that has failed them and failed many, many others. It is a system where concerns were repeatedly ignored, where the value of lives was weighed against the value of profits on a balance sheet and could come out the poorer, and where, in one of the wealthiest cities in the world, just a few miles from the centre of power, those concerns could be rendered completely invisible by decisionmakers just a few miles away.

For far too many people in this country and for social housing tenants, the reality is that they too often hold none of the cards. That is simply wrong. When they challenge bad practices, they should not have to fight the system. They should feel the whole system pulling in behind them.

That is why we welcome and support the Bill. It is also why we believe that tenants deserve the strongest legislation that this House can provide. Let me take three areas where we know the Bill can be improved and strengthened. We welcome the establishment of an advisory panel, but tenants should be at the centre of that, setting the agenda, not just responding to it, and we will bring forward measures in Committee to seek to ensure that that is the case. We welcome, too, the progress that the Secretary of State referred to that was made in the other place on the professionalisation of standards in the social housing workforce, but we know that that could be further improved and further strengthened. I was genuinely interested to hear the Secretary of State raise concerns about the impact that that might have on smaller providers. It is a very different reason than the one given in the other place for why the Government felt that it was not possible to strengthen those provisions. Perhaps that is something that we can work together on to resolve. Finally, rights are no good without the means to enforce them. The regulator must have the resources necessary to do the job, and we will be bringing forward measures in Committee, which we hope the Government will support, in order to ensure that that is the case.

Most of all, we want to see the Government get on with the job. It has been five years since Grenfell, four years since the Green Paper, and three years since promises were made in the Conservative party’s election manifesto. How can it possibly be the case that we are approaching the end of 2022 and we still do not know when the measures in the Bill will come into force? This is a short Bill addressing an area of clear political consensus. We have a Secretary of State in post again who has a reputation for getting things done when he

sets his mind to it. It took him seven months to scrap court fees, six months to ban microplastics, and three months to pass the entire Academies Act 2010, using powers normally reserved for passing anti-terrorist legislation. It has been well over a year since he was first appointed to this post. Why is this less of a priority?

The Bill is an important part of solving the housing crisis, and we need to get on with it, but it is only one piece. It seeks to address the imbalance of power in social housing and the appalling conditions in social housing that too many people have to endure, but there are 1 million people languishing on the social homes waiting list, struggling with those same power imbalances and squalid housing conditions in the private rented sector and watching their rents soar completely out of control. The only way to deal with that is to build more social homes, but the record has been indefensible. Every year since this Conservative Government took office, an average of 12,000 social homes have been lost from our housing stock. The Secretary of State knows it, and, to give credit to him, he has acknowledged that we need more social homes.

“The availability of social housing is simply inadequate for any notion of social justice or economic efficiency.”

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. As she has correctly said, the biggest problem with social housing is that there is not enough of it. The past 12 years have seen under-investment in the social housing grant and many properties being lost to the system—many associations are selling off properties because of the multiple demands of having a development programme that they cannot fulfil, of having poor conditions of properties and of having overcrowding in their stock. That means that, increasingly, they are looking at more and more desperate measures. Although the measures in the Bill are welcome, what we really need is to see social housing restored to its pre-eminence as the first port of call, rather than the last port of call, for people in housing need.

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and for the work that he has done over many years to highlight the housing crisis in this country. He is absolutely right; it is not just that we are not building enough, but that far more social homes are being lost from the social housing stock. I pay tribute to the many Labour councils that are seeking to do something about that, even in very tough times. In Salford, Ipswich, Southwark and Doncaster, house building has continued and the social housing stock continues to grow. When Labour was in Government we built double the amount of social homes than are currently being built. When we come back into Government, whether in a few months’ or a few years’ time, we will finish that job and restore social housing to the second largest form of housing tenure, where it belongs.

The Secretary of State acknowledged the problem in his speech. I agree with him, but that was back in February and still very little has been done. That is why I press him on the urgency of passing the Bill and getting this done. There is much more to turn our attention to. He sat in the Cabinet in 2010 that cut the budget of the affordable homes programme by 60%. He has served multiple Prime Ministers who cut local authorities’ budgets to the bone and imposed social rent cuts that have hampered their ability to build and

invest. It is time to finally get this legislation on the statute book so that we can turn our attention to tackling the housing crisis.

Nothing matters more than a home. Security in your own home, the right to make it your own and the right to live somewhere fit for human habitation are non-negotiable. Housing is not just the market—it is a fundamental human right. Any Government worthy of the office would take action right now to mend that deliberate vandalism of our social housing stock, restore it to the second largest form of tenure and finally get developers to sign fire safety pledge contracts. The deadline for that passed months ago.

We must get on with this and release people from the misery of not knowing whether they live in a safe home. Leaseholders face appalling charges and uncertainty, trapped in homes that they thought were forever homes but have become a prison. We must abolish the feudal, archaic leasehold system and replace it with a commonhold system fit for modern Britain. We must make good on the promises to hand power back to private rented tenants, starting with abolishing section 21 no-fault evictions and proper, decent home standards fit for the 21st century.

Families across this country are desperate to escape their housing conditions. Many are desperate to get on to the housing ladder, but a few weeks ago their Government crashed the economy and mortgage payments were sent through the roof. For hundreds of thousands of people, the dream of home ownership has gone up in smoke.

Surely, the absolute bare minimum that any Government worth their salt ought to deliver is for every single person in this country to have a decent, safe, warm home and the power to drive and shape the decisions that affect their lives—and nowhere more so than in respect of the housing that they inhabit. The Government have recognised the need to empower social housing tenants and to improve safety and standards in social housing, and they will get no complaints from us about that.

There is, finally, political consensus that the scandalous conditions in which far too many families are forced to live are not just unacceptable but a stain on modern Britain. We welcome that recognition, even though it has taken too long to get here. There is so much more to do. We need to now get on with the job.

5.33 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I join others in welcoming the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities back to his role. I thank him for the understanding that he previously showed and continues to show of the importance of social housing issues, and for the kind remarks he made about me.

I welcome the Bill, which has been a long time in the making, but which, critically, responds to the concerns about social housing, the attitude of some social housing landlords and the interaction between social housing tenants and landlords. Those concerns have existed for too long, but they were brought into sharp focus by the terrible tragedy of the fire at Grenfell Tower in 2017.

In the immediate aftermath of the fire at Grenfell Tower, one of the things that became very clear to me in talking to people from the estate, survivors and others was that the people responsible for managing the homes in Grenfell Tower—not just the council, but the tenant

[Mrs Theresa May]

management organisation—simply failed to listen to the comments, remarks and concerns that tenants were raising about safety issues. It was not just a one-off comment that a tenant might have made; it was comments, remarks and concerns being raised time and again by the tenants, and no action was taken.

Of course, that was not confined to Grenfell, or even the wider North Kensington estate. Particularly when Housing Ministers were listening to tenants across the country, we saw and heard that that experience was mirrored up and down the country. As has been referred to, my Government published the social housing Green Paper in 2018 and launched a call for evidence as part of a review of social housing regulation. That led to the social housing White Paper in late 2020 and now, at last, we have the Bill.

What was clear throughout that process was that, while many tenants had a positive experience to report, there was a problem at the heart of our social housing system. That is why I welcome the Bill as a means of strengthening the regime of social housing regulation. By the introduction of the new consumer regulatory regime, which will be more proactive, and in enhancing the economic regulatory role and providing new enforcement powers to strengthen the regulator's role, it aims to ensure that landlords do not just listen but, critically, act when problems are raised. Crucially, the Bill puts the emphasis on making the tenants the focus of landlords' work, with a particular priority rightly given to safety issues. By enhancing transparency and accountability, the Bill will help to set a different balance between the interests of the tenants and those of landlords, and emphasise the delivery of services to the tenants.

So far, all well and good, but there is an area where I hope the Government will accept there is a desire from many that they should go further. It is an area that the Secretary of State has already referred to: the question of the professionalisation of the sector. I am aware that the Government introduced amendments to address this issue in the other place, and that an amendment from Baroness Hayman of Ullock to go further was narrowly defeated, but I am not convinced that the Government's proposals fully address the issue.

The Government have introduced requirements for the social housing regulator to set regulatory standards on staff competence and conduct. Once in force, the regulator, in the words of the Minister in the other place, would

“proactively seek assurance that providers are meeting them.”—
[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 18 October 2022; Vol. 824, c. 1029.]

That was an alternative to the other approach, which has been supported by Grenfell United and others, of the Government mandating professional qualifications.

I have looked at the Government's arguments. The Government have said that the sector is so diverse that mandating a set of qualifications or a single qualification would be too restrictive, that there is no single qualification that would meet the diverse needs of the sector—the Secretary of State referred to that—and that landlords need to have the flexibility to determine what qualifications their staff need. It was also argued that this would make it harder to recruit staff and that there was a risk that it would lead to staff who did not have the right attitudes and behaviours. I find all those arguments extraordinary.

Social housing is provided for those in need. Why is it that in other social professions staff are required to be suitably qualified and to be prepared to accept an ethos, a code of ethics or values, yet we are not willing to require that of those employed to manage the homes, particularly the safety of homes, that social housing tenants are living in?

What is more, it is all very well saying that professionalisation would lead to the wrong attitudes and behaviours, but the very reason that we have the Bill today and that we are discussing it is that there are too many people managing social housing with the wrong attitudes and behaviours. I fail to see how making the management of social housing professional—requiring people to have qualifications, saying it is a valuable and worthwhile career, ensuring people have the knowledge and skills needed to do the job—leads to worse outcomes. Professionalising social housing management would, over time, mean that the perception of the role would change. It would come to be seen as a worthwhile career, and would attract more dedicated people interested in what would be seen as a valued profession.

As for the argument that one qualification could not cover all the roles, I am sure the Secretary of State, with his intellect, will soon be able to destroy that argument. There are many ways that that can be approached. We can limit the role that we initially set the qualifications for—to, say, senior management—and allow further qualifications to be developed. We could set up a range of qualifications. They are many ways in which that issue can be addressed; it is not insoluble.

Behind these arguments lies something critical to providing a better future for social housing and social housing tenants, and it has already been referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes): we need to remove the stigma of living in social housing. Those who live in social housing should be able to feel proud of where they live, and not feel that people are judging them because they live in social housing. Ensuring the professionalisation of the management of social housing would send a clear message of the value that Government attach to social housing, and the importance of ensuring that those charged with looking after the homes of others have the skills necessary to do that. If we do not care who manages social housing, it is easy to think that we do not care about those who are living in social housing. If we care about those who manage social housing, we show that we care about those who are living in social housing.

Mr Francois: I pay tribute to all the work that my right hon. Friend has done in relation to Grenfell, which has been of great importance. I declare an interest as someone who grew up in a council house. I have great sympathy with the argument she makes. Does she agree that as well as qualifications a key thing is attitude, and that people who run housing associations need to have a positive attitude to their tenants and not, as is sometimes the case, a negative one?

Mrs May: I absolutely agree. The problem we have seen, and that we saw at Grenfell, was that the attitude was that negative one of just ignoring tenants and not listening to what they were saying. It is essential that people have the right attitude, and see social housing tenants as people who are living in those homes. If people have concerns about their homes and their safety, those concerns should be listened to.

Another objection has been raised about the possibility of professionalisation requiring qualifications for those managing social housing: it would lead to the reclassification by the Office for National Statistics of all social housing providers as public bodies. None of us wants that to happen, and I know the angst that the issue causes in Government, having been there when the last change in the classification of social housing took place. However, no one knows definitely that the ONS would reclassify it in that way, and no one seems to know where the tipping point is regarding how much extra regulation would move such providers into the category of public bodies. Can the Government achieve professionalisation in a way that does not lead to reclassification? Can the regulations be rebalanced to ensure that professionalisation can be brought in and that tipping point is not reached? I welcome the commitment that the Secretary of State made in his speech to work across the House to find solutions and see whether we can find a way through this. I hope that, during the remaining stages of the Bill, the Government will have that conversation with the ONS and will actively seek to table amendments that allow for proper professionalisation of the sector without reclassification.

This important Bill aims to deal with inequities that have been there for too long. It should lead to deeper concern for the needs of social housing tenants, and a greater willingness of all those who are managing social housing to listen to their tenants. However, we should also all aim to remove the stigma that is attached to social housing. That would be of real benefit to all involved. I believe that the professionalisation of social housing management would be a real legacy for the 72 who sadly lost their lives on that fateful night in June 2017.

5.44 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The need for secure, genuinely affordable social housing is one of the biggest issues facing my constituents. It forces too many of them into the instability of temporary accommodation, it blights the health of constituents forced to live in damp, overcrowded accommodation and it holds back children and young people who are unable to fulfil their potential at school because of the conditions at home. So I support the principles of this Bill, the strengthening of regulations that it will deliver and its potential to improve the quality of existing homes, but it is not a solution to the whole of the housing crisis that we face—a housing crisis that deepens and worsens with every passing year. Without central Government investment in new, genuinely affordable social housing and the proper regulation of the private rented sector, my constituents will continue to suffer.

I want to speak today about an amendment that I will be tabling to the Bill, which I hope the Government will support. The amendment, which is supported by Shelter and the National Housing Federation, seeks to ensure additional protection for secure social housing tenants who are forced to move home due to a threat of violence. My constituent Georgia found herself in those circumstances. Georgia and her children were happy in their housing association home, where they had lived for nine years, when her oldest son was threatened by gang members who came to the flat one Saturday afternoon while Georgia was at work. She worked for the NHS. Georgia went to the police, who told her that

her son's life was at risk and she had to move immediately for his safety. Her whole life and those of her children were turned upside down in that instant.

Georgia's local council provided temporary accommodation in another borough, but it was really poor quality and without enough space for her sons to study properly. She had been there for a year when her case came to my attention. The move and the place that they were forced to live in took a terrible toll on Georgia and her children. Having referred her to the council for temporary accommodation, Georgia's housing association began steps to end her secure tenancy, essentially sending her to the bottom of the housing list, facing a wait of many years before there would be any chance at all of being offered another secure tenancy.

My amendment would create a new obligation on social landlords, whether councils or housing associations, to protect the tenancy rights of secure tenants who have had to move due to a risk of violence, and create a new duty on them to co-operate with each other when a tenant needs to move area for their own safety. These simple measures will mitigate the already serious and traumatising effects of serious violence, particularly gang-related violence, on families. It will help to prevent one moment in a young person's life from destabilising their whole family and help them to focus on getting the support they need. It will stop families needlessly entering an already overwhelmed social housing waiting list and minimise the time spent in temporary accommodation.

In the end, after more than a year in temporary accommodation and following my intervention, Georgia and her children were rehoused by their housing association within a week, but not before they had suffered horrific consequences. There are some details of this case that it is not appropriate for me to share in this Chamber. I hope that colleagues will believe me when I say that Georgia and her family suffered consequences that no family should ever have to bear as a result of the destabilisation that they faced.

I have encountered similar cases in which families know that their secure tenancy will be at risk if they move due to a risk of violence, so they avoid that by sending the young person who is at risk of violence away to live with family or friends. Again, the amendment would give security to those residents: there would be a limit to the instability they face and help to prevent a crisis from turning into a tragedy. There are too many families in my constituency who are suffering the trauma of serious violence in our communities, and it is the responsibility of all of us to do everything possible to mitigate its impacts. This amendment would do that. Georgia's law would help to ensure that other families did not suffer as Georgia's family have, and I commend it to the House.

5.49 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State back to his position. He was once described as a member of the Notting Hill set. I will be saying a lot about Notting Hill Genesis housing association this evening, but—to paraphrase Emperor Hirohito—not necessarily to its advantage.

I am grateful to have been called to speak on this new Bill to improve the regulation and safety of social housing, not least because I have raised concerns about

[Mr Mark Francois]

the issue before. In reiterating them, I declare an interest of sorts as someone who grew up in a Basildon council house in the 1970s and 1980s.

In my experience, registered social landlords such as housing associations vary greatly in quality. Some are really rather good, with sound management, attention to detail and a commitment to pay close attention to the welfare of their tenants. Others are very different. As a constituency MP, I have had some very poor experiences—like my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), it would appear—of how they have treated my constituents, their tenants.

In fairness, regulators vary in quality, too. Some of them—such as Ofsted, which inspects schools, and the Care Quality Commission, which inspects hospitals, other medical facilities and care homes—are clearly taken seriously and even respected by those whom they seek to regulate. I believe that we need an organisation that displays equal rigour in the regulation of social housing. It must be a good thing to have a tougher regulator with greater powers to hold to account housing associations and the people who run them, some of whom are extremely well paid, for the service that they provide. That is why I am happy to support the Bill tonight.

The military have a concept called ground truth. In simple English, the term describes what goes on in reality—on the ground—rather than on a general's PowerPoint presentation, perhaps thousands of miles away. In other words, it is what really goes on in practice, rather than in abstract policy or theory. I will illustrate my argument by sharing with the House three examples of ground truth from my constituency that relate to social housing.

The first example concerns the quality of housing maintenance, or rather the lack of quality. Basildon Borough Council, including the town of Wickford in my constituency, has a relatively large social housing stock, including several thousand properties that were transferred across when the Commission for the New Towns was dissolved in the 1990s. In 2016, the council signed a highly valuable contract with Morgan Sindall, a major corporation, for the maintenance of its social housing stock. According to its latest annual report, the group chief executive of Morgan Sindall, Mr John Morgan, received a total remuneration package last year, including a bonus, of some £2.7 million.

Morgan Sindall's housing maintenance arm, Morgan Sindall Property Services, has been maintaining the properties for about six years with relatively few complaints. A year or so ago, however, I suddenly started to receive a torrent of complaints from Wickford constituents about the timeliness and quality of their repairs. In some cases, it has taken Morgan Sindall many months and multiple visits from numerous employees to carry out even basic repairs for social housing tenants.

The situation is clearly completely unacceptable. I have received complaint after complaint from constituents over the past year or so, particularly about the poor response from Morgan Sindall to requests for assistance. The principal reason appears to be that Morgan Sindall restricted its visits to undertake repairs during the covid-19 pandemic to emergency or highly urgent cases. That has allowed a considerable maintenance backlog to accumulate,

totalling thousands of cases, which it is obviously now struggling to clear—hence the massive increase in tenants' complaints.

In fairness, last week I met Mr Alan Hayward, the managing director of Morgan Sindall Property Services, who personally assured me that the company is negotiating an improvement plan with Basildon Council to return its service to something more akin to its pre-covid performance. We agreed that in future I would report all complaints directly to him and copy in the council to seek much swifter redress for aggrieved tenants. We will have to wait and see how the situation pans out, but clearly things cannot continue as they are. My rent-paying constituents deserve a much better service from Morgan Sindall; I am seeking to ensure that they receive one, including by raising the matter this evening.

Secondly, on competence, I have raised in the House the very poor management provided by Notting Hill Genesis—a housing association that needs much tighter regulation or, ideally, to be taken over by someone else who knows what they are doing. Notting Hill Genesis is run by a chief executive who, according to its annual report, earns total remuneration, including pension emoluments, of more than £300,000 per annum, which is almost twice that of the Prime Minister. Some housing association chief executives earn considerably more than that.

In particular, I have highlighted the poor management of a sheltered housing unit in Rayleigh named Sangster Court, which has been nicknamed “Gangster Court” by locals because of the way in which Notting Hill Genesis extorts money from its tenants for what they believe—as residents have told me—is a very poor service in return. On my last visit, I was especially concerned to hear complaints from the residents about fire safety—so much so that I wrote to our very proactive police, fire and crime commissioner, Mr Roger Hirst, to urgently request a fire inspection by Essex County Council Fire and Rescue Service. The results of the subsequent inspection, which I will send to the Secretary of State, were damning, with multiple serious deficiencies identified that Notting Hill Genesis has had to rectify and comply with.

One of those deficiencies included having to replace inadequate fire doors in the building. The company has just written to me to confirm that that will take some 16 weeks. Post the Grenfell tragedy and with the subsequent Grenfell inquiry drawing to a close, I would much rather that those vital safety improvements were undertaken in 16 days. That illustrates the tin-eared approach that, in my experience, is characteristic of Notting Hill Genesis and its senior management. I wonder whether the non-executive directors of that organisation are content with the lacklustre and complacent reply that I received, especially concerning the fire safety of their residents. I am intrigued to know what, if anything, they intend to do about it and what the Secretary of State is minded to do about it.

I hope that the tougher social housing regulator that is envisioned in the Bill will prove much better at holding failing housing associations such as Notting Hill Genesis more firmly to account; or, even better, will help to encourage someone more competent within the sector to take them over and materially up their game as a result.

Thirdly, again on safety, the Secretary of State will appreciate that a facet of substantial modern housing developments is that they now often include a sizeable portion of social housing, usually administered by housing associations. One such development is the new Bloor Homes development, off Ashingdon Road in my constituency. That has a highly complex and controversial history, which I shall not attempt to recount here in detail, as it could take literally all evening. Suffice it to say, Bloor won on appeal despite intense local opposition, including from me as the local MP. Although it has planning permission, it is seeking to fell a 100-year-old oak tree to create an entrance to the new estate directly opposite both an infant and a junior school, which between them, accommodate more than 500 staff and pupils.

As clauses 10 and 11 of the Bill relate directly to safety, including, presumably, that of the tenants in the new development whose children would be likely to use the schools that are just opposite, the House should know that the headteachers of both schools issued a joint letter last Thursday that included the following statement:

“We experienced a frightening glimpse into the future, when on Friday 21st October the pavement access was reduced in readiness for the tree removal. The situation was carnage, and it was only through our dedicated teaching staff actively marshalling pedestrians and on-coming traffic that there was not a serious accident.”

Safety must be paramount. With the tree occupied by protesters and the local community up in arms, the whole sorry episode is rapidly degenerating into a public relations disaster for Bloor Homes, which is repeatedly described by my constituents as “arrogant”, or often far worse, and which appears to have desperately little regard for the feelings of the local community, its locally elected councillors or, indeed, its local MP.

Despite its uncompromising attitude, I genuinely appeal to Bloor in the House of Commons tonight, even at this 11th hour, to reconsider its approach and facilitate a redesign of the junction to save the tree and, even more importantly, to ensure the safety of the pupils—some of whom are as young as five—at both the schools. A company with even the slightest regard for its public reputation would surely attempt to do so, but this is Bloor Homes, so we shall have to wait and see.

In conclusion, I welcome the Bill because it seeks to create a tougher and more effective regulator for the social housing sector, in which many of my constituents, as well as the constituents of colleagues across the House, continue to live. In my experience, some housing associations, such as Sanctuary, which is under new leadership and is actively considering requiring tenants to sign off repair work so that the contractor is not paid unless and until the repair is completed satisfactorily, are gradually getting better, while others such as Notting Hill Genesis appear to be getting worse.

Having spoken to headteachers post Ofsted inspection, or hospital managers after a visit from the Care Quality Commission, I have no doubt that when their regulator turns up they take the visit extremely seriously indeed. I would like to see a similarly powerful social housing regulator whose objective is to ensure a better and safer service for tenants, and which housing associations and the like dare not ignore. I wish this important Bill and the Ministers in charge of it Godspeed and good luck.

6.1 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The issue that we are discussing is quite personal for me. I think back to when we lived in temporary accommodation. We were placed, from Brixton, in a B&B in King’s Cross. My late mother was one of those women who made sure that you never missed school. We always had to take the tube from King’s Cross to Brixton to go to school. When we were finally rehoused—my mum, my two sisters and me—it felt like the fairy tale, with the security of our own home, somewhere that was safe, somewhere that was warm, somewhere where we could push the key into the lock and know that this was our home, which was vital for the stability that we had growing up.

It saddens me that many of the constituents I now represent in Vauxhall do not have that. It saddens me that, as the MP for Vauxhall, the majority of my casework relates to housing. It saddens me that, many years after I grew up on a council estate in Brixton, the conditions and state of some of the properties in which my constituents live has not improved. It saddens me, because I know that as a country we should and can be doing better for those tenants living in social housing. It saddens me that there is still such a big stigma for people who live in council housing. When I visit them, I see them taking so much pride in their home: they are people who decorate their home, and they lay out their pictures so I can see their children and families. They are people who have so much pride in their home, but the way in which they are discussed by some councils and housing associations shows that they are treated with disregard. They are treated as the lowest form of people because they live in social housing. That should not be happening, and the tone in which we debate and talk about social housing tenants really matters.

A number of people living in social housing continue to pay their rent and service charges on time. A number of those people are always in credit, as my late mother was, yet when they contact their landlord or housing association they are sometimes met with a barrage of abuse. They are told, “Why are you complaining?”, and meet a barrage of annoyance. We need to change that, and one way in which we can do so is by introducing regulation. The Bill is long overdue, and it contains really good measures, which I welcome, but the reality is that this long-awaited regulation will not happen if we do not have the right funding.

Another area that we need to look at is safety across the social housing sector. Tenants living in social housing raise these issues time and time again, but they are often dismissed until there is a fatality—we know that that has happened in some cases. We have seen what happened when residents living in Grenfell Tower complained about fire safety. I have consistently raised issues relating to fire and the evacuation of disabled people. My inbox is filled with messages from so many people in my constituency who to this day have unsafe cladding and fire defects in their property. Imagine the mental toll it takes on someone’s mindset when they go to sleep every night with their young child or elderly family member that they care for, knowing that there are safety defects in their property.

There is also the mental stress that people are facing. A number of my constituents are unable to remortgage. Every time the Bank of England base rate goes up, their

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

mortgages go up. They are stuck, prisoners in their own homes that they have saved for and worked two or three jobs in some cases to buy. They dreamed of owning their own home, only to see it all shattered, because that dream has now turned into a nightmare, whether it is leasehold legislation, service charges or bills for unsafe cladding—all things that it is within our power to tackle.

Coming back to the key issue of the state of some of our social housing, it is important to say that over the past 12 years, sadly, we have not seen that investment going into social housing. The repairs and maintenance contracts have been divvied up by different landlords. With some of those repairs and maintenance contracts, they even have the audacity to charge my local council, Lambeth, and not actually carry out the work. We hear stories of tenants waiting two or three hours on the phone trying to get people to come out and do repairs. We hear stories of tenants missing a day's work, only for the people not to turn up to carry out those repairs. When tenants complain, they are met with the same disdain. This cannot go on.

I hope that we can move forward on this and make sure that we recognise that tenants living in social housing deserve the best standards of living, deserve to be listened to, deserve to be able to challenge their housing associations and landlords, and deserve the compensation that, in some cases, they should have received long ago, if we look at the state of their housing.

My only question to the Minister in discussing this matter is this: can she commit to allocate those urgent resources to the regulator to allow it to perform effectively its inspections and any other new duties that arise from the Bill? If not, I know that many tenants I represent will continue to write to me, because all of this discussion will be in vain. Many tenants will be watching this debate today, hoping that the Minister will give them that reassurance, and I hope that we do not have to come back here in a year's time to discuss and debate the same thing.

6.7 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): In welcoming this Bill on behalf of all my social housing tenants in Dudley, I wish to acknowledge and place on record the hard work of my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) while he was a housing Minister. I know that he approached that work with a great deal of passion and dedication. I also note the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May)—and, indeed, her contributions today—with whom I very much agree.

If there is one thing that I know will unite this House, it is the desire of all our constituents to have a safe home, receive high-quality services and be treated with dignity and respect, but for too long I have received many emails and letters from social tenant constituents complaining of long delays for repairs, poor communication with their landlords and housing officers who are seemingly not interested. I think of a recent communication with one of my constituents in Dudley whose internal wall plastering collapsed on her child in April. We are now in November and still no repair has been made.

I am not here to criticise all social landlords or housing officers, as many do exemplary work to ensure their tenants are treated with dignity and respect and are assisted in a timely manner. I know that officers in the Dudley homelessness team work extremely hard to ensure constituents have a roof over their heads and they do not find themselves on the streets.

While the House would usually see me standing here arguing for less state intervention, I believe this Bill is in fact necessary. It goes a long way to driving up standards and ensuring that social landlords fulfil their obligation to a high standard and in a timely fashion. The Bill grants the regulator power to issue social landlords with performance improvement plan notices if they fail to meet standards or if there is a risk they will fail to meet standards—much like Ofsted does in schools. Tenants will be able to request to see copies of their landlord's improvement plan, and if the landlord fails to comply with improvement plan notices, they could be issued with enforcement action or a fine, or have to pay compensation. In any other situation, this process would be commonplace, so it is right for that to be introduced for social housing.

6.10 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi). I think all hon. Members on both sides of the House would agree that everybody should have a home that is safe, warm, of a decent standard and genuinely affordable, yet we know that many people live in homes that are not safe and certainly fall way short of even the Government's decent homes standard.

Years of funding cuts to local authority budgets, as well as the four years during which the Government imposed a 1% social rent cut on local authorities, have inevitably taken their toll. The pandemic also hit housing revenue accounts hard, which has led to a huge issue in relation to the standard of social housing, but it is fair to say that the standard of most social homes was falling long before the pandemic—it has been going on for years.

In my constituency, housing and housing repair make up my biggest casework issue—every month, when I do my reports, it is always housing repair—and the same housing associations are always in question. More than 5,000 properties in my constituency are managed by housing associations. Many constituents raise issues about the standard of housing and about the poor customer service. Tenants are being made to feel that they should be grateful to have a home, and that the poor, substandard conditions and the management of those homes are not things that they have any right to question or even complain about. If this Bill goes some way to alleviate the challenges that they face, that can only be a good thing, because those challenges have had a devastating effect on tenants' mental health and wellbeing.

One constituent has spent more than two years trying to get repairs to his home. He has been making complaints, but there has been no resolution, so he has had to live with a hole in his kitchen ceiling since January 2020. It really should not have taken an intervention from me to have that rectified. It should never be down to our offices, which can make things happen, to ensure that social housing providers fix the problems that their tenants face. Providers have a duty to ensure that the

housing that they provide is of a decent standard because, as all hon. Members would agree, people do not live in those homes rent free; they pay rent and, in many cases, service charges.

The Grenfell fire made us all aware of the consequences of inaction when people living in social housing are disregarded and their complaints are consistently ignored. Such a tragedy should never have happened in our country in 2017—the year that I was elected. I pay tribute to Grenfell United and all the bereaved families and survivors of that tragic event. The Government promised justice and committed to ensuring that Grenfell would never happen again, but more than five years on from that tragedy, they have still not secured justice and no one has really been held responsible for what happened.

Many people, including my constituents, still live in unsafe homes that are not fit for habitation. It is right that we are debating the Bill, but it is long overdue, because the Government have failed in that. The Government's Green Paper on a new deal was published in 2018—four years ago—so we are still going very slowly, at a snail's pace.

The Bill is very important and should have been introduced earlier. If we want to deliver transformational change for social housing tenants, improve the quality of housing and ensure better regulation of the sector, the Bill needs to be improved. I am pleased that will happen in Committee, but I want to make a few points about the Bill as it stands.

There is nothing in the Bill to address the low levels of supply of social homes. There are thousands of people on the waiting list in Battersea. The reality is that for 12 years the Tories have not only failed to build social homes, but overseen the loss of homes at an unprecedented scale. Between 2010 and 2021, more than 134,000 homes for social rent were either sold or demolished, without any direct replacement. On average, that is a net loss of over 12,000 genuinely affordable homes every year, which is scandalous.

As has been said, it is over five years since the Grenfell fire. The Bill is too late for those people, and that is why I want the Minister to provide commitments on the timings for introducing the necessary regulations to ensure that the measures are enforced. Although the sector could act in response to the Bill's changes, the Government should not and cannot rely on good will alone.

I mentioned earlier the issue of customer service, which many of my constituents continue to raise with me. Baroness Hayman was right when she said in the other place that

“housing management is no more complex than other professions that have legal requirements for training and development”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 18 October 2022; Vol. 824, c. 1032.]

The Bill as amended in the other place still does not guarantee that staff will be appropriately qualified or engaged in training and development so that they can provide the best level of service. Why will the Government not commit to ensuring that all staff are properly trained?

The regulator's inspections, which we all welcome, are a vital part of the Bill, and they must deliver the change that tenants so desperately need. They are the main way to check that providers are abiding by the law and responding to concerns. Although I welcome the amendment agreed in the other place, I believe that

more information is needed on how the regulator will conduct routine inspections on all its landlords to ensure that consumer standards are always met. Will the Minister give more detail on how the new inspections regime will actually work and be delivered? I would also like her to commit to sufficient new resources, because this will only work if investment is made and resources allocated to allow the regulator to effectively perform its inspector role and any other new duties that may arise as a result of this Bill. The Secretary of State talked about fire safety. I would like the regulator's remit to be expanded to make sure that it will monitor building and fire safety.

As I have said, there are a lot of good things in the Bill and it is welcome, but it needs to be improved. It is a shame that it has taken so long, but we are where we are and I hope that, as the Bill continues its passage through the House, it can be improved in many ways to ensure that tenants, regardless of whether they are in social housing or the private rented sector, are at the heart of it, because they are the ones who really matter.

6.19 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I too welcome the Secretary of State back to his position. I also broadly welcome the Bill. Above all, I congratulate everyone who has campaigned so effectively for these improvements following the terrible tragedy of the Grenfell fire, more than five years ago now, on their tenacity and tirelessness. However, I must repeat the question asked by Members on both sides of the House: what has taken the Government so long? Providing fairness and accountability for people living in social housing should have been a much higher priority, and we would have liked to see the Bill much, much sooner.

I want to say something about local government funding. The pandemic has significantly increased the financial pressure on local authorities, and that is being exacerbated by rampant inflation and high interest rates. While everyone is committed to improvements in the rights of tenants in social housing and their ability to hold their landlords to account, there is an urgent need for clarity on how that will be delivered and funded, given the stressed state of many council budgets. It is essential for the Government to find ways of filling the funding gap for local authorities to ensure that the most vulnerable people are protected.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Conservative Government promised that no one would lose their home as a result of it, but now there are nearly 1.2 million people on council housing waiting lists. According to research carried out for the Local Government Association and its partners, every pound invested in a new social home generates £2.84 in the wider economy, with every new social home generating a saving of £780 a year in housing benefit. It makes sense to allow councils freedom to deal with the social housing need in their communities, and I urge the Minister to consider this as a matter of urgency.

A study published last December by the National Housing Federation found that one in five—about 2 million—children in England were living in homes that were cramped, unaffordable or unsuitable, and that 8.5 million people in England were facing some sort of

[Helen Morgan]

housing need. However, that urgent need is not being met by the provision of new social housing in England, not least because local authorities do not retain 100% of the proceeds of houses sold under the right to buy.

As a brand-new MP at the beginning of this year—and with an inbox full of emails about social housing issues—I was astonished to learn, on meeting members of my local housing association, that homes bought by tenants under the right to buy were often immediately let by their owners into the private rented sector. When there are nearly 12 million households on social housing waiting lists, that is, in my view, a failure of policy. Measures to support home ownership should not lead to a reduction in the overall number of affordable social rented homes. Any loss of social rented housing risks pushing more families into the private rented sector, as well as driving up housing benefit rents and spending, and compounding the homelessness crisis. I therefore urge the Secretary of State to allow local authorities and housing associations to retain 100% of the proceeds of houses sold under the right to buy, in order to maintain and build the stock of social housing as appropriate for the needs of their communities.

We have discussed the urgent and pressing issue of the cost of living crisis on many occasions recently in this place. It seems that the Government have missed an opportunity to ensure that homes provided in the social housing sector are not unnecessarily expensive to heat or unnecessarily cold to live in. Moreover, about 21% of our carbon emissions come from our inefficient homes, of which social housing is often the worst offender. On the basis of personal experience, I can testify that the windows are easily the most problematic element.

In 2015, the Conservatives abandoned the Liberal Democrats' zero-carbon homes policy, as a result of which 1 million homes have been built that cost more to heat and emit more carbon dioxide than they need to. So where are the provisions in the Bill to retrofit our social housing with insulation, and ensure that newly built social housing is warm and affordable? While including energy efficiency in the regulator's objectives is a welcome step, it is clear that more could be done to reduce fuel poverty and help us achieve our net zero objectives.

There are some other items on my wish list—they may be for future legislation, but I would like to mention them. Along with colleagues on both sides of the House, I want to hear a firm commitment to ending no-fault evictions of those in both private rented accommodation and social housing. I also want the dangerous cladding that still affects much of the social housing stock to be dealt with as a matter of urgency, and I want to see an extension of the safeguards applying to faulty electrical appliances to online marketplaces, so that we can ensure that a terrible tragedy like Grenfell does not happen again because of unsafe appliances in people's homes.

In conclusion, the direction of travel in the Bill is certainly welcome, albeit a little overdue, and I urge the Secretary of State to work with parties across the House to improve it further.

6.24 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I broadly support the Bill, but as it stands its scope is clearly too narrow to address the crisis in social housing, as I think the Secretary of State accepts.

I would like to focus briefly on one issue. The Bill proposes a new access to information scheme, which would make social housing providers more accountable to their tenants and regulator. However, it appears that the scheme falls short of making social housing providers truly accountable as council providers have to be, as it does not bring social housing providers under the remit of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Without being subject to that Act, social housing providers can refuse and have refused to be transparent about important elements of their business practices, even though they are receiving public money through rent and support.

Indeed, in 2021 Greater Manchester Law Centre ran an investigation into covid evictions in which it sent freedom of information requests to 23 social housing providers across Greater Manchester. It found that six social housing providers claimed not to be classified as public authorities and that they were therefore not subject to freedom of information requests—they refused to answer. Some 13 failed to reply at all. It is clear that the Bill must be amended to make social housing providers subject to the 2000 Act. I hope that the Secretary of State and Minister will make that simple yet necessary amendment as the Bill proceeds to Committee.

More widely, I have serious concerns that the Bill fails to address the crisis. When the news broke of the shocking and tragic death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in Rochdale, I am sure that, like me, many Members were shocked to their core. Little Awaab's lungs had been exposed to damp and mould in the flat where he lived with his family, and it was found that his death was directly linked to those poor living conditions. The court recently heard that Awaab's family battled the problems at their home for a number of years, even before Awaab was born. Indeed, they had filed a disrepair claim against the housing association.

What is clear is that Awaab's death should have brought great anger to this country—one of the richest economies in the world. It should have been a moment of reckoning: the instigation of a national mission for decent homes that would have seen the rapid deployment of Government funding to build new homes and bring existing ones to a decent standard. But sadly, I do not think we have yet seen such promises from the Government—indeed, we face threats of further austerity over the coming weeks. Although the Bill suggests a regime of routine inspections of social housing, we have yet to see any detail about how that will actually be delivered and funded.

Along with other Salford MPs and our city Mayor, I wrote to all our housing providers because we were extremely worried. We asked for urgent reports detailing the quality and condition of each of the properties that our housing associations manage, evaluated against the decent homes standard. But the fact is that years of effective cuts and freezes on rents without Government funding to match have meant that housing associations often do not have the resources to inspect properties routinely, let alone upgrade them regularly to the standard required.

Let us also remember that in 2010 funding for new social rented housing stopped completely and that an affordable rent tenure was introduced, in which homes are rented at up to 80% of their market rent. As *Inside Housing* has reported, although many housing associations tried to use their own funds to keep building some social rented homes, in 2010 nearly 36,000 social rented homes were started; the next year, after funding cuts, that number reduced to just over 3,000. The National Housing Federation and Crisis have shown recently in their research that 90,000 new social rented homes need to be built every year, but a lack of funding has meant that only about 5,000 are being built.

In the meantime, how can any of us in this House be sure that our local residents are not living in the same conditions as little Awaab's family, stuck in old, unsuitable properties that are riddled with issues? The fact is that at the moment we cannot be sure, because unless our residents come to us directly we do not know. When that occurs, it is usually because they feel they have not been listened to. They have tried everybody else first and felt that every single door has been shut firmly in their face.

Although we of course all have positive success stories of issues being addressed quickly by housing associations—I have worked with some brilliant housing association personnel in Salford—we also have myriad cases in which they have not been dealt with, there is not enough funding to deal with the issues, or the resident needs to be rehoused and there is simply nothing suitable available for them.

It would take me many hours to go through my list of cases, but let me give a few examples. I have cases of young families living in high-storey tower blocks without baths for their children because there are no suitable properties for their needs and they have been put in properties that are suitable for those with medical needs and given wet rooms instead. I have residents who have been told that they cannot open the windows at their properties properly because the window is too heavy and might fall out.

I have residents living in freezing buildings this winter where all the cladding has been removed but not yet replaced because the Government at first refused to fund its replacement. The local housing association had to secure a loan to carry out the works, and now structural issues have been identified that need urgent repair. Not only were the residents refused Government help during the fire safety crisis in the first instance, but there is now no additional Government support for them as they face a winter of sky-high energy costs because their buildings have no cladding. Many report to me that they are now just not putting the heating on, which is quite frightening.

I also have reports of people battling mice and rats. They should be moved out of their properties but there are no other houses available to put them in. I have elderly people with mobility issues who have been placed in upstairs flats when they need a ground-floor property to have any semblance of quality of life. Again, no suitable properties are available.

The list is endless. Social housing has been fundamentally crushed by this Government over the past 10 years. In the city of Salford alone we have almost 6,000 households on our housing register and there are 108 bids per property advertised. What does that mean? It means

that families are crammed into unsuitable accommodation because there is simply nothing else available. Those who do get properties are supposedly the lucky ones who should be grateful for what they have received, while the housing team creaks under the volume of people who have not been so lucky and are desperate to find a decent home to live in.

As the cost of living crisis bites, a crisis is coming down the tracks this winter in the shape of social housing rent affordability. The Salford City Mayor and deputy mayor, along with Salford MPs, recently wrote to the Government to request a social rents freeze across the board and that they make available the funding to deliver this locally. We have yet to receive any semblance of a response from the Government.

Yes, I support the Bill. It goes some way towards regulating the sector, but it does not tackle the root causes of the problems that my local residents face, it will not provide the homes and repairs that they need now, and it will not ensure that a decent, warm, safe and secure home should be a right for all. Only a change in Government will do that.

6.33 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey).

I should say at the outset that I welcome this Bill—but my goodness, it is long overdue. As always, context is key. Here we are reinventing the wheel after the coalition Government battered our social housing system from pillar to post. They abolished the Audit Commission and the housing inspectorate in the bonfire of the quangos and slashed the social housing budget by 50% overnight. The idea that the former right hon. Member for Tatton has been seen in Downing Street fills me with fear.

But reinvent the wheel we must. I have said many times in this House that my inbox is filled with social housing and disrepair cases, but now it is bursting. There is even a weekly meeting of my office staff and Clarion Housing Association to monitor disrepair cases one by one. I sometimes feel as if I work for Clarion Housing Association.

The spark was the appalling disrepair of the Eastfields estate in Mitcham, which made national news last year thanks to the tireless campaigning of my constituent Kwajo Tweneboa. He lived in a property overtaken by mice, cockroaches, damp and mould. Tragically, his father passed away of cancer while still in that house. Kwajo says that he asked for help before he died, but nobody listened.

Before focusing on the measures in the Bill, it is important to put them in context. Let us take the example of a tenant living in a home in disrepair, with a leak in the roof. The tenant starts by raising a case of disrepair with their landlord. They take a day off work to wait for a knock on the door that does not come. Frustrated, they follow up with a call centre, but no one there knows their name, their case or their home. Meanwhile, their roof continues to leak. They enter a multi-stage written complaints process in which they are careful not to mention the threat of legal action, which would shut their case down immediately. Throughout each stage, the roof continues to leak.

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

Still no joy? The tenant could turn to the ombudsman, but it will look at the process, not the disrepair. The next obstacle block is the need for a signed form from a designated person such as an MP or a councillor, or an eight-week wait if such a form is not secured. More hurdles, more bureaucracy, more leaking from the roof. Eight weeks on, the ombudsman is not looking at whether the leak has been fixed, but at whether the process has been correctly followed. Can the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) honestly say that she would have the patience to follow that process if she had water dripping through her ceiling electrics? I certainly cannot.

The tenant instead takes their complaint to the housing regulator. As it stands, however, the regulator states that it

“can only take action against a landlord when it has made significant, systemic failure that breaches the standards we have set”

and that

“Although our role is not to resolve individual disputes between tenants and landlords we signpost tenants, or their representatives, who have individual complaints, to the Housing Ombudsman Service.”

That is the same ombudsman that is checking whether the process has been followed.

Can the Minister imagine how frustrated tenants must be by this point, and how bad the leak has become? The whole process requires the patience of a saint, the tenacity of a five-star general, an endless amount of mobile phone data, a laptop to email, and a postgraduate degree in bureaucracy. I wholeheartedly welcome the Bill because a strengthened regulator could not be more urgently needed.

Will the Minister commit to allocating sufficient new resources to the regulator to allow it to perform its inspection role effectively as a result of the Bill? Can she give any more details on how the new inspections regime will be delivered and funded? Let us be under no illusion: the measures in the Bill do not build a single new socially rented home. We now have 1.15 million households on social housing waiting lists across the country, but just 6,566 new social homes were built last year—one of the lowest numbers on record—and at that rate, it will take 175 years to give everyone on the waiting list a socially rented home.

I welcome the Bill, which I will follow closely as it passes through the House. I hope we pass it quickly, because the roof is still leaking.

6.39 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I say what a joy it is to sew into this debate? Any Member who runs a very busy constituency office will know what a huge chunk of their appointments and casework is taken up by social housing. I fully support the Bill that we have before us tonight. I thank both the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for her contribution in pushing the Bill forward, and the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), who is not in his place, for playing such an instrumental role. I also thank all the Members who have contributed to the Bill as they have played a significant and helpful role in taking it forward.

What we have before us tonight is a consensus of opinion. The tragedy at Grenfell, which so blighted the United Kingdom, brought this matter to a head. The fact that the Bill is in front of us tonight indicates just how important it is to deal with what happened.

I declare an interest as chair of the healthy homes and buildings all-party parliamentary group. I have a deep interest in this issue and in how we can do things better not just because it is a constituency matter for me back home, but because it is important in this place, too. I understand that the Bill is for England and Wales and not for us in Northern Ireland, but I seek from the Minister an assurance that whenever the Bill is completed it will be shared with all the regional Administrations, especially the Northern Ireland Assembly, where it could be instrumental in making things better. The same is true for Scotland as well. Making things better is the purpose of the Bill and it is what I would love to see happening.

I wish to give a Northern Ireland perspective on the matter, although I am ever mindful that the Minister has no responsibility for that. Let me explain what the Bill is about, how it can be replicated in Northern Ireland and why it is important. The facts are clear. There is a social housing crisis before our very eyes. We do not have enough housing—enough suitable housing for families, for vulnerable children with special needs who cannot share a bedroom with a sibling. We do not have enough warm well-built housing in areas with schools, shops and all the necessary parts of life within walking distance, or with good infrastructure links for those who do not drive or cannot drive and for those who cannot afford to keep a house. We do not have enough affordable apartments for young people needing to move for a job or for their mental health—this in a society that is coming down with mental health issues. That applies to my constituency anyway. We simply do not have enough housing stock, and what we do have unfortunately does not cut it.

Let me give a snapshot of Northern Ireland and of social housing in my own local council area. I recognise very clearly, as others have said, the importance of social housing. For many people, it is probably the only option they have, so it has to be a good option.

The snapshot of social housing in my area shows that approximately 650 units of temporary accommodation were acquired to meet the significant increase in demand, and that 150 void properties were brought back into use as furnished hostel accommodation. At the end of March 2021, there were around 117,000 live housing benefit claims. Again, that shows us why social housing is so important. Housing benefit enables people to get that social housing, and so it is really important for us in Northern Ireland. There were 18,000 new housing benefit claims assessed in the year to 31 March 2021. In the past year, almost 110,000 emergency home repairs were carried out. Again, many Members, including the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (*Siobhain McDonagh*) who spoke before me, have talked about that leak in the roof. We deal with leaks in the roof every day not just because of the rain, but because they are a fact of life.

The number of applicants on the waiting list and in housing stress in the borough increased during 2020. By March 2021, there were about 3,100 applicants on the waiting list for Ards and North Down Borough Council,

with 2,144 in housing stress. The social housing market does not meet this need. The difficulty we have in my area is that a number of landlords have decided to sell their rental properties to make the most of the bump in house prices. Of course prices are coming down now—by 10%, according to the figures in the press last week. Some people think those prices could fall by as much as 30%. Whatever value has been made in housing over the past two years could evaporate very quickly. Houses have been sold and potential rental accommodation has been sold as well. That and the inevitable increase in rent means that a lack of one or two-bed suitable housing sees a single person paying £625 per month—that is the figure in my constituency—for a terraced home. Local housing allowance or housing benefit is just over £404, so a single person has to find another few hundred pounds to make rent, never mind pay for gas, electric and food. That comes at a time when energy prices are going through the roof.

The Bill cannot alleviate all our problems, but it can go some way to making them better. Those who are working and not entitled to housing benefit are in an awful predicament; there simply is not the affordable housing for the low-income person or family. There must be a push to getting housing stock in the market up to scratch.

I agree with the Bill, but my fear is that, while public sector housing landlords will bid for more money to meet their obligations, private sector landlords will simply decide that selling is their best option. I can understand that someone wants to make a profit on a property that they have bought, or wants to let a property go because they can no longer afford to keep it, but perhaps the Minister can give us some indication of how we can prevent that from happening and build our stock, rather than lose it.

The Government must ensure that, along with the rights and proper regulations contained in the Bill, there is support for those landlords who let affordable housing and want to meet their obligations, but do not want to spend more than the house is worth. The hon. Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) said that not every landlord is a bad landlord—we must remember that they are not. Many are committed to making properties better. Sometimes we have to work with the landlord to see how we can help them to move forward.

We must provide help for social housing tenants to access improvements and schemes that are part funded by a designated fund, and ensure that those who simply cannot get social housing can find affordable housing that is fit for standard. That must be done in co-operation with landlords who are not making a killing, charge an affordable rate, yet simply cannot bear the entire cost of double-glazed windows or anything else that is essential.

I understand that the Bill will be discussed and regulations will be brought forward in the near future. The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) referred to an amendment that she will table. It is an excellent amendment and, if accepted by Government, it will be a positive step in the right direction. I ask the Minister to consider the scheme that I have outlined, which cannot be abused and will retain affordable housing stock, rather than cause the sale of yet more housing stock.

6.47 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close this debate for the Opposition. I thank all those who have contributed and echo the sentiments expressed at the outset by my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) about the other place. As they always do, their lordships brought a considerable amount of expertise to bear in scrutinising the Bill. As a result, it has already been improved in several important respects. I thank them, in particular our friend Baroness Hayman of Ullock, for their efforts and for the constructive, cross-party approach adopted throughout the proceedings.

It would be remiss of me if I did not also use this opportunity to pay tribute, on behalf of the Opposition, to the work of Grenfell United and the Grenfell Foundation, who have pushed at every turn for this legislation to come forward and to ensure it is made as robust as possible. Lastly, I commend the contribution of all those who have been a voice for social housing tenants over so many years, including campaigners such as Kwajo Tweneboa, ITV's Daniel Hewitt and many hon. Members in the Chamber this evening.

There have been a number of excellent contributions in the debate. In total, I counted 10 speeches from Back Benchers, some of them incredibly powerful, and all of them in complete agreement that the Bill should proceed, and at pace. That such agreement exists across the House reflects a shared understanding that the lives of far too many social housing tenants are blighted by poor conditions, and far too many social landlords fail to treat their tenants with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

As the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan, made clear, given the scale of the problem, the Opposition regret how long it took the Government to bring this legislation forward. It is now more than five years since the horror of Grenfell, more than four since the Green Paper was issued, and nearly two since the White Paper was published. Surely, time could have been found earlier to pass what is, after all, a short and uncontroversial Bill, but one of real significance for millions of social housing tenants across the country.

That criticism aside, the Opposition welcome the Bill and what it contains. We are determined to see it strengthened in a number of areas, so that standards in social housing markedly and rapidly improve, tenants are able to pursue effective redress and we can better respond to pressing issues such as the problems of serious violence highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). We will work with the Government to secure its passage today.

As we have heard, the Bill has three distinct aspects: first, it introduces a new consumer regulation regime; secondly, it overhauls the existing economic regulatory regime; and, thirdly, it provides the social housing regulator with new powers to enforce both. The second of those parts is entirely unproblematic, and as such I will only speak to the first and the third.

The provisions that relate to the new consumer regulatory regime comprise the bulk of the Bill, and they have understandably been the focus of many of the contributions in this debate. In general terms, we very much welcome the stronger and more proactive consumer regulations the Bill provides for. There are specific issues in relation to each that we intend to raise in Committee, but we

[*Matthew Pennycook*]

welcome changes to the housing ombudsman powers, the introduction of new duties for social landlords relating to electrical safety checks, the requirement that registered providers nominate a designated person for health and safety issues, and the measures relating to the provision of information to both tenants and the regulator.

We support the expansion of the regulator's current fundamental objectives to include those of safety, transparency and, following the well-deserved success of Baroness Hayman's amendment on standards relating to energy demand, energy efficiency. There would, however, appear to be a difference of opinion between the Government and ourselves on whether it may be appropriate to add additional objectives, not least the monitoring of building safety remediation works, and we will seek to explore that matter in Committee.

We very much welcome the establishment of the advisory panel to provide independent and unbiased advice to the regulator and to proactively raise wider issues affecting social housing regulation. However, we are clear that the role of the panel should be enhanced, and we will press in Committee for its composition and functioning to be revised in order that it provides a more effective conduit for the voice of tenants and gives them a greater role in shaping national policy.

Lastly, we welcome the concession made by the Government in the other place in relation to professional training and qualifications, and the resulting inclusion of clause 21. However, and here I reference the very strong argument made by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), we believe the Government need to go further if we are to be certain that the Bill will expedite the professionalisation of the sector, and we will be seeking in Committee to strengthen the Bill to that end.

The provisions that relate to the regulator's enforcement powers and strengthening them are critical to ensuring both the consumer and the economic regulatory regimes function effectively. Again, while there are measures that we will press the Government to consider—for example, giving the regulator the power to order compensation to tenants—in general terms we very much welcome what is proposed in allowing for unlimited fines for non-compliance, the deregistration of social landlords, performance improvement plans, emergency repairs in instances where a tenant faces an imminent health and safety risk, and the removal of the serious detriment test.

We support the introduction of regular inspections, and I commend Lord Best on his work in the other place to strengthen the Bill in relation to them. However, the Bill still does not set out the scope of such inspections or how frequently they should take place. We are convinced it will need tightening in Committee if tenants are to have confidence that landlords will be monitored appropriately. We also remain concerned, and this is a point that several hon. Members made in the debate, about the very real risk that the regulator will struggle to discharge its new functions given the volume of individual tenant complaints it is likely to receive once its remit has been expanded. In particular, we are concerned it will not be adequately resourced to perform its new inspections role. That is why we are convinced that the Government must consider more carefully how they

can help to ensure the regulator is not overburdened—for example, by doing more to enable tenants to enforce repairs themselves—and that it has the resources it will require to carry out its enhanced role, such as by allowing it to retain the proceeds of any fines levied to help fund its work.

Before I conclude, I want to touch very briefly on an issue rightly raised by the shadow Secretary of State in her remarks, and that is social housing supply. By means of reduced grant funding, the introduction of the so-called affordable rent tenure, increased right-to-buy discounts and numerous other policy interventions, the Government have engineered the decline of social housing over the past 12 years, presiding over an average net loss of 12,000 desperately needed, genuinely affordable homes each and every year throughout that period. We fully appreciate that this Bill is not the appropriate vehicle for reversing that decline, but we are also very clear that it cannot be silent on the issue. Provisions could be included in the Bill to help to identify the precise level of need that now exists across the country for social rented homes, and to make suggestions about how a Government serious about tackling the housing crisis can meet that need. We intend to explore that in Committee because, despite the fine words in the White Paper and the usual comforting but ultimately hollow rhetoric deployed by the Secretary of State, the Government are doing nowhere near enough to deliver the volume of social homes our country needs.

To conclude, the Bill is long overdue but wholly necessary and we are pleased it will progress today. Those currently living in poor-quality, badly managed social housing need a better deal. Just yesterday, I received an email from Nicola, a constituent living in Woolwich whose landlord is a member of the G15 group of London's largest housing associations. She felt she had no other choice than to contact me as her MP because for nearly two weeks she has had water pouring down her walls and over her plug sockets, without any meaningful action on the part of her landlord. As we have heard in the debate, cases like Nicola's are not a rarity, but an all too frequent occurrence. The Grenfell community know more than anyone that poorly managed and underregulated social housing can have fatal consequences. Only last week, as my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) mentioned, details were published about the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak following prolonged exposure to damp and mould in the social home his family rented in Rochdale. We must overhaul the regulation of social housing to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of tenants across the country because everyone has a basic right to a decent, safe, secure and affordable home.

We will work constructively with the Government on the Bill, but we will also do everything in our power to further strengthen it because tenants deserve the most robust piece of legislation that this House can possibly deliver. For today, we welcome its progress in the hope that it will mark a turning point in the protection, empowerment and de-stigmatisation of those living in England's 4 million social homes.

6.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): I sincerely thank Members across the House for their valuable contributions to the debate, but also for the

constructive nature in which they have engaged with this crucial legislation. I was pleased to hear that Members from across the House support the principles of the Bill. It is imperative that we get it on to the statute book quickly, so it can deliver the change the sector needs and the change we all know tenants deserve.

It is right that I add my voice to that of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), and many other Members across the House: Grenfell United and the community as a whole have displayed incredible courage and determination over the last five years, turning their own terrible experiences into important and lasting change. Their tireless endeavour has helped to bring this historic legislation before Members today and I wholeheartedly commend them. The Bill is part of their legacy and the legacy of the 72 who sadly lost their lives. The residents in the tower were put in an appalling situation that never should have occurred. We have a duty to ensure that it never happens again.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) is no longer in his place, but spoke passionately about the fact that all social tenants should be treated with respect, a sentiment that all of us across the House certainly share. I put on record my thanks for all the work he did in this particular policy area.

A few Members spoke about the stigma around social housing. We absolutely need to reduce it. It was mentioned by the hon. Member for Wigan, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi). I particularly thank the hon. Member for Vauxhall for sharing her own story. It is clear that she is incredibly passionate about this issue and I hope she will continue to campaign on it with the vigour she has shown to date.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) rightly praised those working in the social housing sector and I share that praise. We have heard tales today of bad practice, but that is very much a minority of people working in the sector. We need to recognise the hard work and dedication of those across the sector to ensure their tenants are in safe and secure housing and are protected. He was also right to say that social landlords must fulfil their obligations. He rightly raised improvement plans and the new fines that will be put in place as part of the Bill.

We have heard from across the House examples of bad practice. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) raised examples from the experiences of their own constituents. I must add my voice in praising Kwajo for his tireless campaigning. Stories like his prove why it is so crucial that we pass the Bill today.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) spoke of Georgia's law. I cannot begin to imagine how difficult Georgia and her son's experience must have been, but I would be grateful for the opportunity to sit down with the hon. Member to discuss that further before we get to the Committee stage.

A number of Members discussed whether we should go further on the professionalisation of the sector, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead. I add my sincere thanks to her for her steadfast campaigning since the terrible tragedy occurred in June 2017. The Government firmly believe that the housing sector should have competent and respectful staff who can meet tenants' needs and deliver high-quality services. That is why we ran a professionalisation review from January to July this year. It brought together tenant representative groups, including Grenfell United, trade bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Housing, landlords, and housing academics to consider the optimum approaches to staff development in the social housing sector. The review was informed by independent research that mapped the current qualifications and training landscape. The review concluded that there was no one-size-fits-all qualification that encompassed every facet of the social housing sector's requirements, although I note the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead about whether it is possible to develop a slightly more detailed set of proposals on those qualifications.

My right hon. Friend also raised a point about potential reclassification by the Office for National Statistics, and rightly outlined a concern we have in Government about the risk that could bring to taxpayers, particularly the fact that £90 billion of debt could be brought on to the public ledger, which is a very real consideration for us. She asked whether it was possible to engage with the ONS, and whether any engagement had already occurred. The ONS will only make a formal classification decision on new policy or regulation once that has already been implemented. In exceptional circumstances, the Government can ask the ONS to perform a policy proposal review, but as the policy is currently still being developed, we are not in a position to request that formal review. The risk assessment that we have undertaken is based on our work with the Treasury classification team, who work closely with the ONS and have in-depth knowledge of the classification framework and its application to the social housing sector. I would be happy to sit down with my right hon. Friend and discuss the issue further before the Bill goes to Committee.

Inspections were raised by a number of hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford and the hon. Member for Battersea. The regulator has committed to delivering regular consumer inspections as part of the new proactive regime. Inspections will help the regulator to hold landlords to account and take action where necessary, ultimately driving up the standard of service delivery to tenants. The Government tabled an amendment in the Lords to put that commitment into law, which gives the regulator a duty to publish and take reasonable steps to implement a plan for regular inspections. The system of inspections will be based on a risk profile to ensure that those landlords at greatest risk of failing, or where failure might have the greatest impact on tenants, are subject to greater oversight. As part of that, the regulator will aim to inspect landlords with more than 1,000 homes every four years. We have had a positive response from stakeholders, including Lord Best and Shelter, since we placed that measure in the Bill.

Let me touch quickly on supported housing. The Government are investing £20 million in a supported housing improvement programme to drive up quality in

[Dehenna Davison]

that sector. My Department is actively engaging with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the charity Crisis, which is campaigning passionately on this issue, to see how we can address the problems raised. Social housing supply was raised by the hon. Members for Wigan, for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Battersea, and for Salford and Eccles. The provision of affordable housing is an existing part of the Government's plans to build more homes and provide aspiring homeowners with a step on to the housing ladder. Our £11.5 billion affordable homes programme will deliver thousands of affordable homes for both rent and to buy right across the country. The Levelling Up White Paper committed to increasing the supply of social rented homes, and a large number of the new homes delivered through our affordable housing programme will be for social rents.

Mr Francois: I congratulate the new Minister who is admirably summing up what I thought was a remarkably thoughtful, consensual and non-partisan debate. On a slightly lighter note, can we do something about the name of the social housing regulator? It does not have to be off-roof, or even roof-off, but could we have something a bit snappier that might strike fear into the hearts of complacent housing association chief executives, of whom there are sadly still too many?

Dehenna Davison: I will certainly take that suggestion on board. If my right hon. Friend has any ideas, I will accept them on a postcard or via WhatsApp. He now has a mission to come up with a snappy name.

The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) raised the subject of energy efficiency. Baroness Hayman tabled a successful amendment in the other place that ties the Government into producing a strategy on energy efficiency in the social rented sector within 12 months of Royal Assent. We are considering how to address that new provision in the Bill and will update the House shortly.

The hon. Members for Vauxhall, for Wigan, for North Shropshire and for Mitcham and Morden touched on the resourcing of the regulator. We are firmly committed to ensuring that the regulator has the resources that it needs not only to deliver the new consumer regulation regime but to ensure that it continues to regulate its economic objectives effectively. We have made an additional £4.6 million available in 2022-23 to support the new regime. We will potentially be introducing changes to the fee regime, which will be subject to consultation to ensure that the regulator is funded appropriately.

The hon. Member for Strangford, as always, adopted a constructive approach, wanting to ensure that those in Northern Ireland learn the lessons of the terrible tragedy of Grenfell and that they can benefit from some of the incredible measures that we are bringing forward in the Bill. He will have heard the Secretary of State speak about his engagement with devolved Administration Ministers and officials; I hope that that has provided him with some assurance.

We have heard today how a Bill with a relatively small number of clauses can have such a large impact. Addressing housing in this country is central to our levelling-up mission. It is essential that social tenants live in safe, good-quality homes provided by responsible, well-run registered providers. I am pleased to be closing this

insightful Second Reading debate; seeing how passionately Members across the House feel about the Bill only reinforces its importance. I look forward to taking the Bill through Committee and working with shadow Ministers and all interested Members across the House so that we can bring real, lasting change to the social housing sector.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

SOCIAL HOUSING (REGULATION) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 13 December 2022.

- (3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

- (4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

- (5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

- (6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

- (7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Nigel Huddleston.*)

Question agreed to.

SOCIAL HOUSING (REGULATION) BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

- (1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

- (2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Nigel Huddleston.*)

Question agreed to.

**SOCIAL HOUSING (REGULATION) BILL
[LORDS] (WAYS AND MEANS)**

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees.—(*Nigel Huddleston.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 6 and 7 together.

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

LICENCES AND LICENSING

That the Alcohol Licensing (Coronavirus) (Regulatory Easements) (Amendment) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 978), dated 22 September 2022, which were laid before this House on 22 September, be approved.

SPORTS GROUNDS AND SPORTING EVENTS

That the draft Football Spectators (Relevant Offences) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 5 September, be approved.—(*Nigel Huddleston.*)

Question agreed to.

**Football Clubs in England:
Financial Sustainability**

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Nigel Huddleston.)

7.8 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): I am pleased to have secured this Adjournment debate on the governance and financial sustainability of English football clubs. I am very lucky that Birmingham, Ladywood is home to both Birmingham City football club and Aston Villa. It is a privilege to advocate for both sets of fans, although it occasionally calls on all my skills of diplomacy—local football rivalries are very passionate things, after all.

My interest in the regulation of English football, or more accurately the lack thereof, has been engaged primarily because of the position in which Birmingham City fans find themselves. Like many in this House, I take the view that the only way to deal with financial and governance issues like those that have plagued Birmingham City over the past decade or so is for the Government to bring forward legislation for a new independent regulator of English football. The Government, of course, commissioned the fan-led review of English football. That review was undertaken by the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), and I pay tribute to her detailed work and advocacy on behalf of football fans all over the country. Many other Members across the House have also long campaigned for changes to be made to protect our national game. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has done important work, as have the Football Supporters' Association, the all-party group for football supporters, and campaign groups such as Our Beautiful Game. All of that campaigning has provided the background to the breakthrough of the fan-led review's findings.

The Government were pushed into that review after the quickly aborted plan for a breakaway super league, which would have destroyed club football in our country. Those plans threw into sharp relief many of the issues in the game that, before then, were too easy to ignore and to leave to the clubs to sort out. We all know that things simply cannot carry on as they are. The current system incentivises teams in the premier league to spend unsustainably to remain in the premier league, and it incentivises teams in the championship to spend up to the hilt to get there because the financial rewards are so great. However, that is destabilising clubs and the whole football pyramid in our country. Too often, there are question marks over ownership and the potential motivations of those who buy English football clubs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that, although clubs may feel that they are owned by us fans, who buy the gear, attend the matches and use pay-per-view, the fact is that these clubs are big businesses and like any big business, they must be appropriately regulated and managed? I therefore fully agree that the House must do more to protect clubs from bottom-line share price profit as the driving force, as opposed to the love of the game, which we all have, and the desire for a club to perform as best as it should and could.

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member is absolutely right. We learned through covid that fans are the lifeblood of the game. If we take away fans, it destroys not only the business model but the spirit of football.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this very important debate. As ever, it is wonderful to be in the Chamber at the same time as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). However, his point was very much about the premier league. Many clubs are not on the stock market. Clubs like Bury football club in my constituency are small businesses that are the centre of their community. I know exactly what Birmingham City is going through. My team, Huddersfield Town, where I am a season-ticket holder, is going through something similar, although hopefully it will be not as bad as it is for Birmingham. However, there is no regulation in the game. The English Football League and the Football Association do not regulate football teams. That is the problem and it is why we need a regulator.

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I will come to that point. Without regulation, none of football can thrive. The premier league cannot thrive, nor can all the other teams that are not in that league. It is a pyramid, an ecosystem, that depends on every part of it being well regulated to make sure that some of the smaller clubs—I hate calling them smaller clubs actually, because they mean a lot to their communities—have just as much to offer our national game as the big clubs at the top, which have much more money.

On ownership and how that can change across football clubs, too often, there are question marks over the potential motivations of those who buy English football clubs, which can become vehicles for bolstering the reputations of foreign leaders, politicians and businessmen close to politicians whose interests may run counter to our national interest. Sometimes we know who those people are, but sometimes the true ownership is disguised—a sure sign that there is something to hide. However, in those cases, and this goes to the hon. Gentleman's point, the club, its fanbase and its value as a community and national heritage asset becomes a plaything of those who have no stake and no commitment to the community, and who do not care for the heritage value—which I consider to be the real value of football clubs—and see it only as a tool of commercial interest.

James Daly: I understand the hon. Lady's point about foreign Governments, and so on. However, we have to understand that a lot of people with malevolent intent take over a football club by borrowing from exotic lenders to then, essentially, take every penny out of that club. These are people with malevolent and often dishonest intent. That is not about the big-picture, wider geopolitical issue that she mentions—I am talking about pure and utter greed by people who are dishonest.

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There is an issue at the bigger end of the spectrum, with the involvement of potentially hostile foreign Governments, but right underneath that there are a number of individuals going to great lengths to disguise where the money ultimately comes from and to disguise their identities. I will come on to that issue in relation to

Birmingham City football club. The business model that that creates for football is not sustainable and should not be tolerated in something so vital to the fabric of our national life.

In the end, as the fan-led review found, it is the regulatory underlaps and overlaps in the current system that are allowing bad behaviour to fall through the cracks, meaning that some clubs are left in severe financial distress. The Premier League and the English Football League have their own owners and directors tests, but given that there are several examples of unsuitable owners passing these tests—including those with a history of bankruptcy, those engaged in legal disputes with other football clubs, and even those with serious criminal convictions—let us just say that the tests do not fill anyone with any confidence whatsoever. The fan-led review laid bare all of those issues and the need for an independent regulator and a complete overhaul of the current system in order to prevent the collapse of football clubs across the country.

I am desperate to make sure that Birmingham City football club can be rescued from its current predicament and put on a sustainable footing. It is one of the oldest football clubs in the country. It was founded in 1875 in Small Heath, which much of the country will know as peak “Peaky Blinders” territory, and which is also the part of Birmingham that I was born and raised in. It acted as a rifle range for training soldiers in world war one, and like much of Small Heath it was bombed during world war two. It is steeped in history and has a heritage that Brummies across the city are proud of, but for many years Blues fans have watched with devastation as financial and professional mismanagement has driven their beloved club to the brink.

In 2009 the club was bought by Hong Kong-based businessman Carson Yeung, who was sentenced to six years in prison on money laundering charges just two years later. The club was then bought out of administration in 2016 by the current owners, Birmingham Sports Holders Ltd, a company that is backed up by a convoluted network of shell companies and overseas stakeholders. With a crumbling stadium and a far removed invisible ownership, points deductions and crippling debts, the club continues to swing from crisis to crisis. The once premier league team has not finished higher than 17th for six years in a row.

How did our beloved club get to this point? The first issue is debt, which the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) has also raised, which has put the club's finances under significant strain. The 2021 accounts reveal that the Blues spent £37 million more cash than they generated from day-to-day activities and that they are grappling with over £120 million of debt.

It is well known why and how clubs can get themselves into such eye-watering levels of debt. As the fan-led review notes, our current system creates misaligned incentives, with clubs spending to the hilt to get promoted to higher leagues in order to secure bigger TV deals and financial rewards. This creates an incredibly destructive cycle. The current lack of regulation also means that football clubs can find themselves hostage to malevolent forces acting with intent other than the sustainability of the football club that they have acquired.

What compounds those issues in the case of Birmingham City is its significant reliance on parent companies to bail it out of financial trouble. Birmingham City's loss would have been much higher had it not been compensated

by major shareholder and chief executive officer of Oriental Rainbow Investments, Vong Pech. The club now owes his company more than £22 million, raising serious questions about its financial position. The club's own accounts state that there is

“a material uncertainty casting significant doubt about company's ability to continue”,

but

“the directors remain in the view the company can obtain required funding from parent or ultimate parent.”

The fan-led review evidences how it was that these exact practices led to the collapse of Bury football club. As soon as an owner is no longer interested or able to invest, the club faces ruin. This is the worst-case scenario that Blues fans dread, but it shows that across English football a completely unsuitable business model has been allowed to take hold, and it is not sustainable.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for what she is saying about Birmingham City. When football clubs fail or are badly mismanaged, it is to the detriment of the whole community. I wonder whether she is aware of Birmingham's tie-up with a crypto firm, Ultimo GG, earlier this year, which it promoted to its fans in February. Only two weeks later it collapsed, taking advantage of the fans' love for the club. Does she share my concern that too many football clubs, and indeed the Premier League itself, are getting involved in crypto-promotions to their fans that can only end in tears? If she does, perhaps she would like to come to Westminster Hall tomorrow and join my debate on that?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the hon. Member for his invitation. I will certainly try to make time to get to his debate—I feel that there is a quid pro quo going on here; we are certainly keeping the Minister busy. He raises an important point that goes to the ethics with which football clubs are run. Fans turn up because they love their football club, and nothing should be promoted to them that results in their being duped by financial practices that might ultimately be found wanting. They should not be put in a position where they trust their football owners and their football leaderships and then end up losing money. Fans should not be taken advantage of, and everybody who is involved in football should be able to sign up to that.

In addition to financial uncertainty, Blues fans are contending with a home stadium that is in a dilapidated and sorry state. The Kop and Tilton Road stands have been closed for two years because their steelwork is badly corroded, meaning that significant works are needed to make them safe again. That would cost upwards of £2.5 million to complete. Despite being repeatedly assured that the stands would be fully operational again by the start of this year's season, the works remain incomplete. The latest update from the club states that work will resume during the World Cup break in November and December, with an aim to finally complete all works in the summer of 2023. In the meantime, stadium capacity remains significantly reduced, slashing the number of tickets that can be sold and further depressing the club's revenue.

The saga of the stadium gets worse. Following the club's points deductions for recording excessive losses, Birmingham Sports Holdings sold its 75% stake in St Andrew's stadium, the home of the Blues football

club, to a British Virgin Islands-based company called Achiever Global in June 2021 to try to improve its accounts. The deal generated £10.8 million, but a news report at the time stated that most of that would be used to repay external Birmingham Sports Holdings debts, leaving a working capital of only £2 million.

According to the Football Supporters' Association, more than 60 clubs have lost ownership of their stadium, their training ground or other property in the last 25 years. Clubs that lose ownership of their ground have also often been forced to relocate away from their home town, which was a serious concern for Blues fans when they learned of their stadium sale. In Birmingham City's case, it complicates the offshore ownership structure further, making accountability about stadium repairs even harder to assign.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The hon. Lady is giving a quite interesting talk, and I will intervene on the Minister in relation to Torquay United at some point. She will appreciate the slight irony in talking about St Andrew's, because that is where, due to stadium dispute, Coventry City football club ended up playing for a number of seasons. That was a real wrench for many fans, and it just shows why there is a desperate need to reform the system of football regulation.

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member is absolutely right. I will remember having to mediate between the competing views of the different fans as well as the residents in the area who suddenly had more traffic to content with and so on. This speaks to the point that football is at the heart of our communities. It is part of the fabric of our national life and it is very much tied to the places in which those clubs were born, where they have grown, and where they are part of the history and the heritage. You cannot just pick a football club up and move it somewhere else and retain the same thing you had to begin with, and matters relating to stadiums make fans fearful about what might happen to the places they call home. I would be devastated if anything happened to St Andrew's or Villa Park, because they are so much a part of the fabric of our great city and our region.

In the normal run of things, when these sorts of problems arise, the football club would sit down with the owners—the ultimate source of the money—and work out how to resolve them, but working out who is the ultimate owner is a huge task in itself. To say that it is complicated is an understatement. Within Birmingham City's ownership structure, Birmingham Sports Holdings Ltd has a 75% stake in the club, but BSHL itself is owned by a total of five other companies, all with shares ranging from 2% to 28%. This structure of shell companies creates murkiness, confusion and a complete lack of transparency, and makes it impossible to track down the ultimate owner and to establish who bears responsibility for resolving problems at the club.

That came to a head earlier this year when it emerged that an individual who Birmingham City had not declared to the English Football League was actually the beneficial owner of a company called Dragon Villa—one of the companies that owns 17% of Birmingham Sports Holdings and therefore 12% of the football club. That individual goes by the name of Wang Yaohui but is also, according to press reports, known as Mr King.

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

Wang is a Chinese-Cambodian national who has served as an adviser to the Cambodian Prime Minister and as a diplomat in Cambodia's embassy in Singapore. He was previously detained by the Chinese Communist party's anti-corruption watchdog on allegations of bribery and money laundering regarding a state-owned Chinese bank. Although he went uncharged, his associate was hit with corruption charges and sentenced to life imprisonment.

It appears that Wang has gone to great lengths to conceal his undeclared commercial footprint. Documents uncovered by Radio Free Asia show that Wang was the beneficial owner of Dragon Villa and concealed from the Hong Kong stock exchange and the English Football League his substantial stake in Birmingham City football club. That is a potentially criminal offence, punishable by up to two years in prison.

The EFL is now investigating these claims. It told me that it is a complex matter and that it has made applications for the disclosure of documents, from not only the club but individuals linked to the club. It confirmed that an investigation is taking place but told me on the eve of this debate that, as the investigation remains ongoing, it is unable to comment further.

The fact that the club failed to declare Wang as an owner demonstrates how easy it is for individuals to avoid scrutiny and bypass the current owners' and directors' test, which in my view—a view that I know is shared by hon. Members on both sides of the House—is completely unfit for purpose. Takeovers of the Birmingham City football club have previously been mooted and come to nothing, but it is now subject to an ongoing takeover.

A consortium led by Maxi López and Paul Richardson is looking to acquire a 21.64% stake in the club after paying a £1.5 million deposit. That takeover went to the English Football League for approval in July 2022, and as part of the process the EFL is now investigating whether the club breached its rules after it emerged that it has been receiving funding from the prospective owners without EFL approval. I must say that I truly sympathise with the Blues fans—whenever they have a little bit of hope, it is quickly dashed with yet more regulatory and governance concerns.

If Maxi López and Paul Richardson are as they say they are, and wish to acquire the club and run it in the way that such things should be run, of course I wish them well and hope that they are transparent and open about their funding source and what they intend to do with the club. Although I am keen not to prejudge the outcome of that process—we all wish to see Birmingham City thrive—I would have more confidence in the English Football League's investigations and approvals process if its tests were up to scratch.

Regardless of where we stand on potential takeovers of the club, or any other club in a similar position, we can all agree on the absolute need for transparency. When someone is looking to buy such an important community asset, they should not be hiding their financial sources or income streams. They should be open and transparent about them, so that we can be sure that our football clubs will be protected. As one Blues fan told me:

“hidden in the dark, these owners need to understand they're guardians/guests of the club. 147 years of history, it isn't just a pop up throw away company”.

I could not have put it better myself.

I pay tribute to the Blues fans, who have shown such commitment and dedication to their club. As much as I love to hear from them, I also dread it, because they get in touch with yet more problems at the club. I despair that unless and until we have an independent regulator of English football, we will not be able to solve the problems that we see at Birmingham City football club.

As we have heard in some of the interventions, the issues at Blues are not unique; they are happening in stadiums and clubs across our country, and in proud towns and cities such as Derby, Oldham, Bury, Wigan and many more. All of those fantastic clubs—all those amazing heritage and cultural assets—could face ruin unless we see decisive action and a regulatory overhaul from the Government, exactly as we were promised earlier this year.

Will the Minister, in his response, explain what he thinks about the predicament of the Blues fans, and what he would say to fans across the country about club ownership structures and stadium difficulties? We all know that there is no overnight solution to the problems at the Blues, but the long-term future of the club and many others like it can be secured only if the Government implement the recommendations of the fan-led review in full. They have long promised a White Paper, which would pave the way for legislation to create an independent regulator for English football.

The time for delay is over. The Government agree that there is a problem, and the fan-led review has given us the solution. The Government say that they agree with that solution, and I say to the Minister that this is literally an open goal.

7.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): I am pleased to respond to this debate and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (*Shabana Mahmood*) for securing it. She opened her speech by discussing the challenge of representing two football clubs, and I imagine that that is quite a tightrope to walk. She rightly highlighted the long history of concerns that many of the fans she represents have expressed. I, too, want to pay tribute to their commitment. It must be incredibly difficult for them at times. She rightly pointed out, too, many of the complexities of the structures of some of those football clubs.

The interest and passion shown in this evening's debate—and, in fact, since I took on this role only a few weeks ago—is testament to the huge importance that the House attaches to securing the long-term sustainability and governance of English football. I, too, want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (*Tracey Crouch*) for the amazing amount of work that she did, along with many other fans, in delivering that report.

Football clubs have an enduring importance in the lives of the people of this country. Many Members have spoken in this debate, and to me personally, of historic and local clubs woven into the fabric of their communities

that have simply ceased to exist or have been relegated because of reckless decisions made by owners and appalling financial mismanagement.

We have heard—I have heard about this endlessly in recent weeks—of the poor or non-existent governance practices in some of our clubs, with fans locked out of key decisions that affect them, which threatens clubs' long-term health and sustainability. Others have spoken of the clear need for a fundamental change in how money is distributed throughout the football pyramid to ensure the long-term health and competitiveness of our national game.

We have heard how English football clubs make significant contributions to all the local communities in which they are based. They are at the heart of local communities, but they also provide many jobs and support for local businesses that rely on them. Fans are the lifeblood of those clubs: they bear the brunt of the fallout of bad ownership decisions; they see where the structures are not working for the good of the game; and they can articulate most clearly how to set that right.

One of my urgent priorities when I became Minister for sport was to hear first hand from fans—I wanted to hear from them first—about where the problems lay in our national game and how we could address them, to ensure a sustainable and thriving future for football in this country.

Kevin Foster: I agree with the tribute that the Minister paid to fans. Certainly Torquay United Supporters Trust has made clear its views to me over a long period, and it engaged directly in the fan-led review. Can my right hon. Friend give us an update on when the Government will respond?

Stuart Andrew: I will certainly come to that in a moment; I am sure that is the bit everybody is waiting for—do not hold your breath. [*Laughter.*]

As I said, one of the first things I wanted to do was to meet the fans. They are the ones who are most invested in their clubs and who go and support them day in, day out, whatever the results, the weather or their fortunes. Without them, football in this country would simply not be the fantastic game that it is.

James Daly: Football is obviously all about its fans; does the Minister agree that it has a potential that is untapped by the state? What with the delivery of frontline services at community stadiums, the groupings and support and everything else that goes with that, the added social value is immense.

Does the Minister also agree that it has been an absolute pleasure to sit in the Chamber with the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood? She should be incredibly proud of the passion she has shown for her community and her football team, and every single Birmingham City fan should be proud of what she has done today because it really does matter. Does the Minister agree?

Stuart Andrew: How could I possibly not agree with my hon. Friend? He is absolutely right. In the short few weeks I have been in this job I have really noticed the passion that everybody has for the sport. Fans sometimes get frustrated with their club's performance, but their

passion and loyalty are to be admired. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to praise the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood for securing this debate.

As I said, I was keen to hear from the fans first, which is why they were the first people I met when I took on this role. I met representatives from the Football Supporters' Association, Fulham Supporters' Trust, Charlton Athletic Supporters' Trust and Blackpool Supporters Trust to hear their stories. All those clubs had suffered at the hands of owners who used and abused their stewardship. This relates to the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Some of the stories I heard were frankly shocking, and some of the sacrifices that the fans had to make to make their point were astounding. The fact that Blackpool supporters boycotted their own club for four or five years really does show the strength of their feeling.

Too many clubs have been lost to the cycle of unsuitable owners taking over clubs, stripping them of their assets, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood said, and leaving them as empty shells, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) said. Too many clubs have been brought to the brink, with owners refusing to fund them any more. We are committed to breaking the cycle of inappropriate ownership, financial instability and poor governance practices. I look forward to the debate that my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) has secured for tomorrow. He mentioned the issue of cryptoassets; I am sure we will be having that conversation for a good few months.

Since my meetings with fans, both the Secretary of State and I have met representatives from the football authorities—the FA, the Premier League and the English Football League—to understand their perspectives on reform, too. The policy is complex and it is important that we get it right. We are talking about matters of finance and governance, and I make no apology for taking the time to ensure that I have properly considered all the issues before me. That is why we continue to engage and hear views from a wide range of stakeholders, including the football authorities and, most importantly, the fans' groups.

Shabana Mahmood: I totally understand that when we are trying to build a totally new regulatory regime, we have to make sure we have thought of every possibility and any unintended consequences, but will the Minister confirm that the end position he is trying to get to is an independent regulator and that he is trying to make sure that the regulatory regime is fit for purpose? The end state we must have is an independent regulator of English football.

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady tempts me to go a bit further than I can at this stage, but I can tell her that I am currently doing all the deep work on the White Paper because I want that to address many of the points she has raised.

Football can take forward some of the reform measures—such as financial redistribution throughout the leagues—now, and I strongly urge the relevant authorities to act and to do so quickly. Meanwhile, we have a new set of Ministers so we are taking a little time. We recognise that clubs are at the heart of many of our communities. Were I not to do the due diligence, I am

[*Stuart Andrew*]

sure that clubs would not be happy with me for not double-checking that everything is right. We are taking the time to consider the policy and consult the numerous stakeholders. We remain committed to publishing a White Paper setting out our detailed response to the

fan-led review of football governance, but let me make it clear: the case for reform is not in doubt.

Question put and agreed to.

7.39 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 7 November 2022

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

Parental Responsibility for People Convicted of Serious Offences

4.30 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I have been advised that the petition debated today was started following the sad murder of Jade Ward last year. Sentencing in that case has now concluded. However, I remind Members that they must not refer to cases that are currently before the courts and should be cautious in referring to any cases where proceedings may be brought in the future.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 614893, relating to suspension of parental responsibility for people convicted of serious offences.

Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for giving me the opportunity to take part in this important debate. The petition calls for the automatic suspension of parental responsibility for any parent found guilty of murdering the other during their period of imprisonment. I want to place on record my thanks to Jade Ward's family and friends and, in particular, Edwin Duggan for their dedication and work in putting together this petition, which has received more than 130,000 signatures. That is a remarkable achievement.

At the heart of this debate is the life and memory of Jade Ward. Jade was an enormously loved mother, daughter and friend. She has been described as the sunshine in the lives of all who knew her. She was bubbly, kind and caring, and truly devoted to her four sons. The last days of Jade's life were spent caring for her grandmother as she recovered from surgery, laughing with her friends in her garden and providing for her children. These final moments typify the life that Jade led and the kind person she was.

On 26 August 2021, Jade was brutally murdered by her estranged husband, Russell Marsh, in a premeditated attack. On 12 April 2022, Marsh was given a life sentence with a minimum of 25 years in prison. After Jade ended their relationship a week before her murder, Marsh had reportedly told friends that if he could not have Jade, no one could. Marsh was a controlling figure throughout their relationship, who would tell Jade who she could see and speak to, and what she could wear and do. When Jade stood up to him, she was killed as punishment.

Jade was just 27 and lived in Shotton. She had four children with Marsh, who were sleeping nearby as their mother's life was taken away from her. Jade's family were horrified to learn that, despite these utterly distressing circumstances, they face the prospect of continued contact with the man who murdered their daughter. Although Marsh will obviously not have custody over the children while he serves his time in prison, despite all his appalling actions, under law, he retains parental responsibility. Jade's mother, Karen, said that she was "absolutely

gobsmacked" to hear that her daughter's killer could still have a say in the boys' lives. If you walked down any street today, Mr Hollobone, and told people how the law works on this matter, I think they would be gobsmacked too.

What exactly does the law say about this matter? When a child does not have a parent to care for them, local authorities have a duty to safeguard the child and find an interim or permanent care arrangement. The child's relatives can seek a court order to care for them, local authorities can initiate proceedings with a view to providing for the child's upbringing and carers can achieve parental rights through a special guardianship order.

Importantly, where two parties have parental responsibility, one party cannot make decisions unilaterally; they must seek the other party's agreement. Responsibility is automatically equal so, in law, neither party's parental responsibility is considered more important than the other's. That stretches to even the most extreme cases, in which one parent has been convicted of murdering the other.

I understand that Jade's parents have been told that if they want to take their grandsons on holiday abroad, they need permission from the father. A convicted parent must also be consulted on issues such as where the children go to school and the medical treatment they receive. Effectively, Marsh has the right to veto decisions made by Jade's parents and pursue a family court hearing.

We can only imagine how traumatic that must be for Jade's parents. They have already suffered the terrible pain of losing their daughter in that way, yet the process as it stands compels them to interact with their daughter's killer. It acts as a constant reminder of surely the darkest moment in their lives. As with Jade's boys, the children are often in the care of the family of the deceased parent. The current process effectively grants the convicted parent the means to continue the control and coercion of the family in the way they did prior to the murder of the victim.

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his powerful speech. Does he agree that "re-victimisation" is not too strong a word to describe what would happen to the family in such circumstances?

Mark Tami: I agree, because it just does not stop and there is no chance to move on—not that it would ever be easy to move on. It gives the convicted person even more weapons to use against the family of the deceased.

It must be extremely traumatic for the children to know that the person who killed their mother or father knows so much about their lives, particularly if they witnessed the murder. The law surrounding parental responsibility is clearly not fit for purpose and facilitates further unnecessary emotional trauma. It helps perpetrators with a history of domestic abuse to practise their controlling and psychological abuse from inside their prison cell. We often think of domestic abuse as physical violence, which it is in many cases, but at its root is control. It is about the perpetrator controlling their so-called partner, and having control from their prison cell must give them a real buzz.

[Mark Tami]

If parental rights are by default retained, even in the most horrific of circumstances, when can they be restricted? The Children Act 1989 allows the guardian or holders of a residence order to go to a family court to bring a prohibited steps order against a person with parental responsibility, but the onus is still on the family to prove that parental rights should be revoked. It is expensive and time-consuming, and is an emotionally draining process for the families, who have to come to terms with the tragic loss they have just experienced. That is why Jade's family—Karen, Paul and Pip—and their friends are campaigning to have the parental responsibility of a parent who is found guilty of murdering the other parent automatically suspended.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): I am very moved by the right hon. Gentleman's speech. As someone who brought up a child on my own, I often worried about what would happen if something happened to me. Does he agree that the current system fails to put the child at the centre of the legislation?

Mark Tami: I agree with the hon. Lady. I will go on to talk about family courts, including some of their problems and the lack of connection between what happens there and in other courts. In this case, and indeed in many other cases, children can be effectively weaponised by the person who has committed the offence, who can carry on their control and abuse.

Currently, the onus is on the family to prove why Marsh's parental responsibility should be revoked or restricted, whereas Jade's law calls for parental responsibility to be automatically suspended in circumstances such as these, putting the onus on the killer to go through the legal hoops of proving they deserve parental responsibility, freeing the victim's family of the traumatic burden they currently carry. As Jade's mother said:

"We are going through enough without having him looming over our heads."

That really sums up the situation we find in the law today.

Unfortunately, Jade's family are not the only ones. Ahead of the debate, the Chair of the Petitions Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), spoke to survivors of domestic abuse who are experiencing ongoing issues relating to the retention of parental responsibility by ex-partners. Their experiences highlighted just how far our laws on parental responsibilities and the family court system are failing children and victims of domestic violence.

One issue that came out strongly from the discussions was that violence committed against a parent is not distinct from violence against a child. Indeed, allowing a child to witness or be surrounded by violent behaviour is inherently abusive in itself. A parent's willingness to subject their child to that surely calls into question their ability to act in that child's best interests.

Yet women who spoke to the Committee felt that family courts do not recognise that. Despite all the convictions for traumatic sexual, physical and emotional abuse, the threat those men pose to their own children's welfare does not seem to be acknowledged. Over and over again, the Committee heard that the abuser's right

to be a parent was prioritised over the children's right to safety. A woman whose former partner was convicted of sexual abuse offences asked what I think is a perfectly reasonable question: why should he be allowed to access their children when he was considered too dangerous to work with or be around other people's children?

For victims of domestic violence and for families who have lost loved ones to an abusive partner, the criminal justice process is often just too traumatic. Not only are they forced to relive harrowing experiences, but they have to come back into contact with the person responsible for them. One might think that once proceedings have ended and a criminal charge has been made and proven, they could begin to move on, but since family and criminal courts are distinct from each other, victims are forced to restart the emotional and burdensome process to restrict parental rights.

One of the women who spoke to the Chair of the Petitions Committee found the family court system itself to be abusive. With renewed contact with her ex-partner, it became a new avenue through which he continued his controlling behaviour. A common opinion was that family courts are not equipped to deal with traumatic cases of murder and domestic abuse.

Both Jade's family and the women who spoke to the Committee also emphasised the financial pressure imposed on them by the current system. Pursuing a case in the family court is expensive, and the lack of funding for legal aid is a longstanding issue, as we all know. Victims and their families are forced into thousands of pounds of debt to restrict parental responsibility, or they face compromising on the safety of their children.

Since the beginning of the family's campaign, the Government have stated that there is already scope for courts to exercise powers

"to effectively remove all parental powers and authority in appropriate cases."

However, the Government are missing the point. Jade's family and friends are already aware of the law as it stands and the current process of restricting parental responsibility, but they, and we, are saying that the process is wrong. The onus should be on the convicted murderer to prove they should have parental responsibility, rather than the family having to make the case for why that person should not. Jade's law would be a simple, common-sense way of shifting the burden away from a victim's family and friends, who have already suffered the anguish of the murder of their loved one. Jade's law would put an end to the endless cycle of psychological torment, lengthy and costly court processes and the constant harrowing reminders that the current system puts on a victim's family and friends.

Let us be clear: Jade's law does not demand the automatic removal of parental responsibility for cases such as these; it demands an automatic suspension, giving the perpetrator the opportunity to go through the legal hoops themselves to prove that they should be entitled to those parental powers. The perpetrator will have to prove they have changed their ways and admitted to their crimes, and that they have gone on a long journey to have the right to be involved in their children's lives, not the other way round.

The petitioners recognise that there are nuances. For instance, they recognise that there are specific circumstances where it would be right to exempt someone convicted of

killing the other parent from an automatic suspension of parental responsibilities. These would include where a convicted person could prove that there was a history of domestic abuse in their relationship and that, although the murder cannot be condoned, the murder trial concluded that provocation was a mitigating factor. However, the principle of shifting the burden of proof is the key message that we are sending the Government today.

Rob Roberts: The right hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. To expand on this interesting idea, does he envisage this measure being akin to a parole board, where somebody fights their case for early release, or would there be some kind of additional legal process, such as requiring them to go back to court and fight for their rights?

Mark Tami: As I said, I believe the process should be turned round, so that it puts the onus on the convicted person, and they would have to go through the same process that the victim's family are effectively forced to go through now.

I am delighted that Labour supports this change, but I do not want it to be a party political matter because it is not. I do not think that anyone in this room, regardless of their party, would stand up and defend the current system or say: "It's absolutely fine. I don't know what the fuss is about." As I have said, if we went out on the streets, almost everybody would say, "That seems to be the correct thing to do". I hope we can move forward across the House and add a mechanism to existing legislation, such as the Children Act 1989, whereby one parent found guilty of murdering the other parent would have their responsibility rights automatically suspended throughout their term of imprisonment—which, again, would impose the burden on the convicted person.

I am not prejudging what the Minister will say, but I am sure his officials will say, as they always do: "This is very difficult. It's going to take a long time. We can't do this; we can't do that". I have always believed that where there is a will, there is a way, and I am sure that the appropriate legislation can be amended to ensure that this change actually happens. The implementation of Jade's law would not add additional costs to the public purse. In fact, it might save local authorities money, because they would no longer have to send social workers to visit convicted parents to obtain permission for things. It is a cost-free or even money-saving reform that would relieve the traumatic burden that the families of victims currently carry, and it is the morally right thing to do. To me, it is simple and common sense.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I had a similar, horrific case in my constituency that related to the parental rights of someone who was convicted of sexual offences against my constituent's children. This is a cross-party issue, and I pay tribute to the right hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), who at that time made change happen and was very supportive. I urge the Minister to make change happen today for Jade.

Mark Tami: I share in those words.

To conclude, I read a statement issued by Jade's parents after their daughter's killer was sentenced:

"Jade was the sunshine in our lives, she was the glue that held us all together. She was also a devoted mum who would do anything for her children, a much-loved friend, daughter, sister, aunt, niece and granddaughter. Jade's whole life was ahead of her, and her death has left a void in all our lives."

Sadly, it is now too late for Jade. But her children, and others in the same situation, still have their whole lives before them. We owe it to them to ensure that the system is on the side of the victims.

4.52 pm

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) and the petitioners for bringing us this important debate. I extend my heartfelt condolences to Jade's family, and thank them for their bravery in advocating for change at such a tragic time.

Looking at the list of petition signatories by parliamentary constituency, there is clearly a strong geographical centre of support in north Wales and just across the border, with strong pockets of support in Delyn, Vale of Clwyd, Ellesmere Port, Chester and, of course, Wrexham. Some 878 people in Wrexham signed the petition, but I have no doubt that support for its aims extends right across the country, across parties and borders.

Let me touch on a few points. The Government's initial response states that, under the Children Act 1989, parental responsibility can already be lifted by the court. There is a mechanism in the Act that allows for a member of a child's family to care for that child if there is no parent to do so on a day-to-day basis. I am pleased that that safeguard and option is already in law, as it should be, but the law could go further.

My concern is that the process of obtaining that legal status is lengthy and expensive, and that, as a direct result of that lengthy process, parental responsibility remains with the perpetrator of a crime until the process is complete. If the process of obtaining what I understand is called a special guardianship order was less time consuming, less expensive and less onerous for family members who honourably try to do the right thing in difficult circumstances, we might not be seeking the automatic removal of parental responsibility.

Although it is different from Jade's law, I do have some experience with the case of constituent who is trying to obtain an order to take over parental responsibility for their grandchildren in the absence of parents who are present and able to parent. My constituent's case constituent highlighted to me how difficult and expensive it is to obtain the guardianship of grandchildren.

Obtaining a special guardianship order can cost thousands and thousands of pounds, and that is assuming that the parent gives consent in the first place. That is the exact opposite of what we should be trying to achieve; where a family member is willing and able to take care of children, we should support them to do so, not put barriers in their way. We should not be making it more difficult for children to be looked after by their family rather than the state. First, being cared for by their family is the best and safest option for children, as they already know them and their routines. Secondly, a child being looked after by the state should never be the preferred first option. The process currently makes it easier for children to be looked after by the state, at

[Sarah Atherton]

significant cost, than by members of their family. In my view and that of the constituents of Wrexham, that is wrong.

The safety and wellbeing of a child are always paramount. I was a nurse and social worker for 27 years, so I have first-hand experience of children being removed from their homes and placed in temporary accommodation that lasts year after year. From many years of seeing this, I know that there is no substitute for a child being raised by their family in a safe and loving home. If all necessary safeguards and checks have been done, and this arrangement can be accommodated, it absolutely should be. Of course, there should be a presumption that if one parent murders another, parental responsibility is removed.

My concern with automatically removing parental responsibility is that we need to have processes in place to deal with the gap in care and decision making. At the moment, the process for handing parental responsibility to family members is too laborious, costly and stressful. We need to make allowances for that or make the process easier, so that children are not automatically cared for by the state when they do not need to be. Local authorities need to be more supportive of families applying for a special guardianship order. However, where the state is needed—remembering that health and social care is devolved in Wales—the Welsh Government need to ensure that councils are adequately funded, so that children always have timely and appropriate care and do not fall between the gaps. Where there are family members who are fit, willing and able to make decisions for the children, that option should always be the priority.

4.57 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair as always, Mr Hollobone. The hon. Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) made some interesting points; the all-party parliamentary group on kinship care has done a lot of work on these issues, which chimes with some of the points she made.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, and for sharing the experiences of Jade Ward's family. There are no words to describe the pain that those close to Jade have been through, but my right hon. Friend did an excellent job of articulating their calls for action. It cannot be easy for those of them present here to have to listen to this debate, but I hope they feel some reassurance. People who have been through difficult experiences often get some strength from the idea that something good may come of the pain they have been through.

It is often assumed that when one parent is sentenced for a serious offence, a legal mechanism is automatically triggered to assure the safety and wellbeing of their children and those looking after them. As we have heard, that just does not happen. When a parent goes to prison and they have parental responsibility, they retain it by default. Care givers must consult them ahead of key decisions concerning the children's names, where they go to school, their religious upbringing and any medical procedures they undergo before their 18th birthday. Where parental responsibility is concerned, the law

does not differentiate between parents who commit non-violent offences and those guilty of serious offences, including murder, rape, sexual offences against children, gang-related violence and so on. As we have heard, that is even the case where one parent has killed the other, or where the parent in prison has killed another family member.

Understandably, the petition is focused on parental or interparental homicide, which is where we should start in terms of reviewing the law, but there are many other cases that involve similar scenarios. Far too many parents have to keep in contact with their abusers for their children's sake. I say "for their children's sake", but that is based on a default presumption that it must always be in the child's interest for the parent in prison to retain contact, and quite often that presumption is wrong.

The only mechanism a child's primary care givers currently have to challenge the perpetrator's right to parental responsibility is through the legal system. A court can terminate a father's parental responsibility on the grounds of their behaviour, but that happens only in exceptional circumstances, where there is proof that the father's retention of that responsibility—I say "father" as a shorthand—would be detrimental to the child's welfare. As I understand it, that has only ever happened four times in England and Wales.

Families are not always willing to put themselves through the extra trauma of attending a court hearing and having to relive the worst time of their lives, with their version of events placed under the microscope yet again. Facing the person who killed or abused their loved one—or abused them—and looking that person in the eye is often very difficult. They might also be fearful that the perpetrator will retaliate in whatever way they can if the court removes the rights, especially if they will be released from prison before the child turns 18. It takes a lot of courage to take a violent perpetrator to court while knowing the risks, and it is easy to see why many would be put off attending court at all. As we have heard, spiralling court backlogs and cuts to legal aid make the process more agonising for the families.

The main thing I want to talk about today is the work of the charity Children Heard and Seen, which supports children with a parent in prison. The primary focus—this is what differentiates it from other charities—is on the interests of the child. A lot of the organisations that work with prisoners' families focus very much on the rights of the prisoner, and there is an assumption that contact with the family is in the prisoner's interests; because we know, for example, that such contact means far less risk of reoffending.

It often shocks people to learn that there is no system for recording when a child's parent goes into prison. Sometimes it is picked up in pre-sentence reports, although the parent will not always admit that they have a child because they worry about them being taken into care. Social services might already be involved with the family, or they might become involved if they suspect that the children are the direct victims of the parent's crime, such as child sexual abuse, but we often find that social services—once they realise the children were not the victims and perhaps other children were—just disappear from the scene.

There is no system for routinely informing children's services at the council or the children's school, or for monitoring the children's wellbeing during a parent's imprisonment. The data is also hard to come by. One figure is used quite a lot—that 312,000 children are affected from year to year. I think that is probably on the high side, but it is impossible to tell. Many children are off the radar, despite potentially being at risk, or very vulnerable and needing support.

Children Heard and Seen runs a support group for carers who look after children affected by interparental homicide. It also supports families who continue to experience harassment or coercive control, despite the perpetrator being in prison. That includes domestic violence cases. I have heard from the charity about the strategies that domestic abusers use to manipulate their ex-partners while in prison, from using illicit burner phones to breach restraining orders, to refusing divorce papers and getting friends or neighbours to harass and intimidate them.

Services supporting victims might tell them they are safe once their former partner is in prison, but that is not always the case. Children Heard and Seen says that allowing a violent offender parental responsibility gives them the opportunity to control their child, ex-partner or family from within the prison walls. On the Children Heard and Seen website, there are quite a few blog posts by people who have been affected by a parent or a partner going into prison.

To cite one case, a mother applied for passports to take her children on holiday after a difficult few years that led up to the father's imprisonment. Because both parents had parental responsibility, she needed his signature to complete the application. He was given the paperwork by the prison officers, but refused to sign it, which meant the family could not travel and the mother lost every penny she had paid towards the holiday. Of course, the father would not have been able to join them on holiday, but it was not about the children at all; it was just another way to pull the strings in his family's life and exercise control over his former partner, despite the physical distance between them.

A perpetrator of domestic abuse might be restricted from contacting their actual victim—such as the mother, in this case—if there is a restraining order in place. However, if they have children together, it is easy for the perpetrator to use that child as a way to stay present in the abused partner's life. Little can be done to stop them calling or writing to their children. As has been said, family services often encourage prisoners to stay in touch in such situations, as it is seen as being in the prisoner's interest. There is also a belief that a child must want to see their parent who is in prison and must be missing them dreadfully, despite having witnessed a lot of abuse at home, and actually being fearful of the parent, and, in some ways, relieved that they have been removed from the household.

The perpetrator can use this contact to say that they will only see the children if the mother brings them to the prison, which, if the child wants to see the parent, is a way of exercising control. They can also make veiled threats through written letters. I cannot imagine how chilling it must be for an ex-partner to have to read out letters from their abuser to their children, in which the abuser may say he is getting stronger in prison and counting down the days until he sees their mum again,

or which contain drawings of the children's favourite film characters holding knives. We need a case-by-case approach, where services work with families to take a more active role in determining when contact is appropriate.

As of 2019, men made up 95% of the prison population. A far higher proportion of men are in prison for serious offences, so it is fair to assume that far more fathers are in prison than mothers. The flipside of that is the extra layer of complexity if a mother is arrested for a serious offence. Societal expectations about a mother's natural role as a primary care giver can lead to the assumption that they should automatically keep parental responsibility. As I understand it, courts cannot legally terminate a mother's parental responsibility, although it can, in rare cases, be limited.

It is important to remember the key principle of the Children Act 1989, which is that the welfare of the child is paramount. A child's right to safety and protection from harm overrides all other legal considerations. How can the welfare of the child be paramount if their imprisoned parent can use contact with them to manipulate or control other family members?

Mark Tami: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case. Although she is talking about people in prison, we have probably all seen instances in our casework—thankfully at a much lower level—where relationships have broken down and children are weaponised by one or both partners. I have always found it very strange that a father might not pay towards the children's upkeep but still has the same rights as someone who does pay. I do not understand that, although I know why it is the case: the two are not seen to be connected. However, I have always had the view that if someone does not support their children, they should not automatically think they should have exactly the same rights as somebody who does.

Kerry McCarthy: I entirely agree. I think we have all seen cases where contact with the children will be supervised and the family will have to go to a centre due to the relationship between the ex-partners, because the mother is fearful of being alone in the same room as the father. I have seen so many examples where that has been manipulated and the father does not actually want to see the children, but instead wants to use the visit as a way of putting fear into the heart of the mother, who is bringing the children along.

Until the laws around parental responsibility change, families will continue to suffer. As we have outlined today, suspending parental responsibility for those who commit serious, violent crimes—at least on a temporary basis—would certainly be a start. The right to parental responsibility could then be reviewed and re-established if the families consent and new evidence indicates it would be appropriate.

It is important to re-emphasise that this is not a matter of removing a prisoner's right to parental responsibility in all instances; it is about protecting children and families caught up in the most extreme circumstances. We need to consider it on a case-by-case basis. Care givers need more input into the process of determining parental responsibility from the start. The police and other authorities need more training in spotting the signs of coercive control within families. Above all, children's best interests and safety must be put first.

[Kerry McCarthy]

It is difficult to keep up with personnel changes in this Government, but I have had meetings with Justice Ministers and the Minister for Children and Families, and I have raised this issue in various debates. We need data on how many children have a parent in prison. Anecdotally, I know that there is a huge number out there, and unless we can identify how many there are and find a way of recording them, we will never be able to give them the help and support they need.

I again congratulate Jade Ward's family for fighting for this change. I hope today's discussion takes us a step further in resolving these issues.

5.10 pm

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): Thank you for calling me to speak in this important and solemn debate, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, and to follow the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). I commend my constituency neighbour, the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), for securing this debate on such a vital issue for our Flintshire community. I will also take this opportunity to butter up the Minister a bit and welcome him to his portfolio. I am sure he is the right person in the right role at the right time to drive this forward and obtain the justice that that family and families across the country deserve.

Crime will always exist in communities. Whatever we do in society and whatever laws we pass in this place, there will always be various crimes of varying degrees of severity. Rarely—thankfully, it is rare—there is a crime that the headline writers say has rocked the community. In August 2021, the Deeside and wider Flintshire community was rocked. This is north-east Wales; this type of thing does not happen in our communities.

The words we use in this place to debate things are important. “Erskine May” tells us that moderate language is of the utmost importance in parliamentary discourse, so I always do my best to keep within the boundaries of that principle. I try to avoid extremes such as “evil” and “hate”. But when Russell Marsh—for the record, that will be the last time I do him the courtesy of using his name in this speech—killed Jade Ward, the egregious act taking place in her home in Shotton, the nature of his crime could quite easily and fairly be described as evil. In the aftermath of that horrific event, Jade's friends and family, and indeed our entire community, could certainly be justified in having feelings of hate. It is fair to commend the North Wales police and the court system for bringing him to justice, as he was handed a minimum 25-year sentence in April. For all the delays and issues we hear about in our justice system, the investigation, trial and sentencing took only seven months. I say “only” seven months, but it was no doubt a lifetime for Jade's family and friends.

Justice was served and was seen to be served swiftly. But was it? Of course, seeing that vile wretch of a human carted off for at least 25 years is justice in one respect, but a lingering problem remains, which we must address. I commend Mr Duggan, the family friend who set up the petition. I am not sure whether he is aware that it attracted signatures from every single one of the 650 constituencies in the UK, from the far reaches of Orkney and Shetland off the north coast of Scotland,

down to St Ives in the south of England, on its way to more than 130,000 signatures, including 2,808 from my constituency of Delyn. Considering that Delyn's numbers for national petitions are normally in their low teens, that is a great indication of the depth of feeling in our community about the issue.

Jade's sons are now in the loving care of her family. I do not think there is a single person among us who can comprehend not only having to attend the funeral of their child, as Jade's parents had to, but having to somehow hold everything together in the aftermath and provide a stable, loving home for their grandchildren.

The difficulties of being faced by the nature of the crime itself are compounded by the fact that the perpetrator has rights. We hear a lot about rights in this building, and how one person's rights are being infringed in favour of someone else's rights. In this case, the perpetrator's rights are being held to have, in some way, some relevance. He has to be consulted; he can take decisions about where the children live, go on holiday or attend school. and he is kept up to date on their progress.

Just to be clear, we take away parental responsibility in cases of serious neglect and in cases of serious cruelty. What more neglectful action could there be than depriving four children of their mother? What more cruelty would we need to see than taking a young lady and murdering her in a brutal and vicious way while her children slept in their bedrooms next door?

I read the Government's response to the petition when it passed 10,000 signatures and I echo the comments made by the Chair of the Petitions Committee, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), in expressing my disappointment with that response. I appreciate the statement that we already have the means in existing law to take these steps, but as has already been mentioned several times, that is time-consuming and expensive, and puts even more strain on the victim's family, who have to deal with an already impossible situation.

In a case in 2013 when parental responsibility was terminated because a father had been convicted of violently attacking a mother, it took years to terminate his rights—something that would have been obvious to anyone with a modicum of common sense about them. In this case, we are talking about a violent murder. It should be an absolute no-brainer that the perpetrator should forfeit his parental rights immediately when convicted of such a horrific crime. There can be no greater cruelty. He should play no further part in the lives of these children. If I had my way, he would play no further part in society for the remainder of his natural life; for what he did, he should have been given a whole life sentence, not 25 years.

People might think that this happens extremely rarely in society, so I did a bit of digging. The House of Commons Library tells me that there were 542 homicides—murders—recorded in England and Wales in the 2020-21 fiscal year. In 414 of those cases, the relationship between victim and offender was known and of those cases, 67 were recorded as being committed by a partner or ex-partner. Assuming that figure carries through to the other cases where we do not know the relationship between victim and offender, that is 87 murders per year by partners or ex-partners where there may be children. To be clear for the record, that is not the number of confirmed cases where parental responsibility is a factor;

it is just an estimate of the number of cases where it might be a factor. Potentially, there are 87 cases a year where the nightmare of a murder is compounded by the additional cruelty of the perpetrator controlling from prison the lives of the children. That is absolutely unconscionable. The statistics do not matter though. I would be making all the same arguments if there was just one family or 10,000 families who are affected. Currently, the law allows the status quo to persist unless a long and laborious process is carried out to change it.

A switch of priorities is required. As the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside said earlier, put the burden back on the murderer. If someone is found guilty of murder, the suspension of parental rights should be made automatic at the date of conviction. Make him fight to get those rights back, rather than make the victim's family fight to block him. Social services and the local authorities will already be intrinsically involved by that point, as there will inevitably be months between offence and conviction. The children will already be in the care of the remaining family or in a suitable foster placement, where that is appropriate. The law simply needs to be changed to give social services the power that they would have if, for example, both parents died.

I come back to the opening words of my speech. I try to avoid extremes of language, but in cases such as this one, in which one parent has unlawfully killed another, the perpetrators should be counted, for the purposes of parental responsibility, as having died as well. It seems to be a complete no-brainer that, rather than put the victim's family through a horrendous process of trying to get parental responsibility removed, re-victimising them and keeping a killer in their lives, we should automatically remove the perpetrator.

We need to bear in mind that according to the Sentencing Council the starting point for the minimum time to be served in prison by an adult guilty of murder ranges from 15 years to 30 years, before taking into account any aggravating or mitigating factors. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the vast majority of cases will lead to a minimum of 15 years in prison for the perpetrator. By the time that sentence has been served, most children are likely to be over the age of 18, so I see no reason not to say that the perpetrator's parental rights should be taken away at conviction and never restored, unless there is a specific and significant reason to do so. My hon. Friend the Minister can work out what "specific and significant" might mean—we will leave that up to the law writers. Should the children decide upon reaching adulthood that they want to have contact with the perpetrator, that of course remains their right, because there will no longer be an element of control over their lives.

The families of victims have suffered enough; there is no reason to prolong their suffering. I hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) said about some of the potential pitfalls that may occur in cases such as these. This is one of those instances where unintended consequences can have wide-ranging implications. We need to keep in mind that the best interests of the children are paramount every time. That said, I believe the change proposed is a simple one, steeped in common sense, that could be made through a relatively short Bill, and I implore the Minister to make it happen with all due speed.

5.21 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone. I thank Edwin Duggan for creating the petition and the 130,000 people who signed it. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) for moving the motion, and the Petitions Committee for scheduling this debate on an incredibly important issue, about which Members have spoken so movingly.

The hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) talked about the re-victimisation of the families. The hon. Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) talked about the current system failing children. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about the brilliant work of Children Heard and Seen, which is based in her constituency. Every Member across the House has spoken about parental responsibility being used as a form of control and a continuation of abusive behaviour, and about the weaponisation of children.

Finally, my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside spoke beautifully about his constituent Jade Ward, and how she dedicated her life to her four sons. He also comprehensively set out the legal framework that underpins Jade's law. As we have heard, at just 27 years old, Jade was stabbed and strangled to death in her home by her former partner as their children slept. When Jade's murderer was given a life sentence in April, the judge described the attack as "merciless". Like my right hon. Friend, I have met Jade's mother Karen and her father Paul. They are devastated by the loss of their daughter, and their grief is without end, as it is with all murders. A close and loving family, they are determined to give Jade's four boys the best life that they can, but they are held back in this because Jade's murderer remains present in their lives through his parental responsibility to the children, even though he is in prison for their mother's murder.

There can be few things worse for a child than to lose their mother to violence, but that trauma can only be magnified when the person who robbed them of their mother is their own father. While we have no official figures on how many children lose their mothers in this way, we do know that two women are killed by their partners or former partners each week. That is a tragedy, but these deaths are not random; they are not accidents or an uncharacteristic loss of control by a perpetrator. All too often, they are targeted killings taking place in the context of domestic abuse. Indeed, the most common time for a woman to be murdered by a partner is when she tries to leave, usually after years—sometimes decades—of coercive control and physical, mental, emotional and sexual abuse. The act of murder is the abuser's way of taking back control once the woman has attempted to break free, but it is not always the end of the abuse.

In cases where there are dependent children and the perpetrator has parental responsibility by virtue of being married to the mother or having signed a child's birth certificate, his rights towards the child remain. Even a life sentence does not put an end to the offender's parental responsibility. As we have heard, that means he has a say in where those children go to school or if they need medical treatment, or if their carers—often kinship carers—can take them abroad. This offers the perpetrator another means of control through which they can continue their abuse.

[*Ellie Reeves*]

In especially harrowing cases, fathers have been able to block maternal family members from gaining residency with the children, with the children sometimes ending up in foster care instead. The fact that, once acquired, a murderer's parental responsibility cannot be suspended without protracted legal battles is an injustice. What greater dereliction of duty towards a child can there be than to rob them of their mother and burden them with a lifetime of trauma?

The House will recall that every year, on International Women's Day, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) reads out the names of the women killed by men during the last year. It is perverse that in some of those cases, having removed the mother's right to life and the right to bring up their children, the father's parental rights are not automatically suspended.

What about the rights of the children? Many will have witnessed violence and sometimes the murder itself, but at present they must be raised knowing that the perpetrator retains knowledge of and access to their lives. For some that results in fear that they may themselves be in danger, and for others it results in decisions being made not in their best interests, but to deprive them of opportunities out of sheer spite. Children Heard and Seen, a charity that supports children impacted by parental imprisonment, reports that the continuation of their father retaining rights over them is a significant traumatising factor in those children's lives.

For the families of the deceased, the instinct to protect the children from the person who devastated their family is strong, but so is the feeling of despair that they cannot keep that person from doing further harm. Jade's law would change that. It would reverse the situation in which the onus is on the victim's family to prove, through protracted legal proceedings, why the perpetrator's parental responsibility should be revoked. Instead, parental responsibility would be automatically suspended and the onus placed on the killer to go through the legal hoops to prove that they deserved that responsibility.

Let me be clear: this is not about punishing perpetrators. The criminal courts take responsibility for that. It is about doing what is right for the children left behind, safeguarding their rights, protecting them from further abuse, and trying to give them the best possible means to thrive.

As Jade's parents have said, they want to stop another family going through what they have been through. I pay tribute to them for their tireless campaigning efforts and for getting this issue as far as they have. Jade's law is a simple solution that would end the current injustice, and I am proud that a Labour Government would put Jade's law on to the statute book. Nothing can make up for the loss of Jade, but we can make sure she did not die in vain. We can make this change and ensure that the rights of children and of victims' families are valued over those of the abuser. I hope that we have the Government's attention today and that the Minister will also commit to making this change.

5.29 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): I begin by paying tribute to the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) for his work, and to the Petitions Committee for securing the

opportunity for us to debate this very important subject. I hope the right hon. Gentleman will allow me to refer to him almost as a conduit for the work that has been done by Jade's family and by Mr Duggan, who I pay tribute to for his campaigning work on this hugely upsetting and challenging issue. I think it was the hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) who highlighted that the petition has attracted signatures from every constituency across the country. I do not know if that is unique, but it is a pretty high bar to pass. There were over 100 signatures from my constituency in rural north Leicestershire. That reflects the impact that the issue has had across the country, and the strength of feeling among people from all walks of life. I offer my most sincere condolences to Jade's family on the loss of their daughter and mother, and to her friends on the loss of a friend, in such horrific circumstances, at the hands of someone whose name I—like the hon. Gentleman—do not propose to use.

The thoughts of everyone in this Chamber will remain with Jade's family. The right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside did something quite extraordinary: he managed to articulate the circumstances, their impact, and the feelings of Jade's family in an incredibly moving and clear way; I am sure I could not have done it. That does not happen as often as it should in this place, especially in the main Chamber, but in this Chamber we sometimes adopt a more measured tone that does more justice to the subjects that we discuss. The right hon. Gentleman's constituents—this is not about party politics—are extremely lucky to have such a dedicated and caring Member of Parliament representing their interests.

I stand here with mixed emotions. In one sense, it is a pleasure to be back in this Department. For almost a year and half, between 2018 and 2019, I was the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State responsible for victims and witnesses. I worked with my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) in her role at the Home Office to commission the rape review, bring forward a victim strategy, get rid of the "same roof" rule for compensation, and look at the victims code. We worked closely with victims of violence, particularly in the context of domestic abuse, and coercive and controlling relationships.

Rob Roberts: I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman is about to give us a reason why he is not able to commit to legislation, so I thought I would intervene to give him a few more seconds to reconsider, and to think of extra ways in which he might squeeze this change into a bit of legislation.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who seeks to gently nudge me. When I held my former brief, working cross-party, I saw the lengths that people will go to in their attempts to manipulate, coerce and control, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), highlighted. Even when a victim or their family are told that they are physically safe because the perpetrator is in prison, that does not address the challenges that they face in feeling psychologically safe. I think the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) highlighted that children are victims too. Those who witness these events, and those who may not have witnessed them but who live with the consequences, are also victims of the crime.

Mark Tami: I thank the Minister for his kind comments. Does he agree that in an abusive relationship, victims often start with the perception that the perpetrator really loves and cares for them, and that that is why they have that controlling behaviour? They tell them, “I really care for you, so I need to monitor your mobile phone. I need to know exactly where you are going.” That turns into an abusive relationship. We have all known about relationships that we worry are not on an even keel. This is one of the most tragic cases that I have come across, but there are many other cases out there. This abuse is still there, is still prevalent and, in the worst cases, can lead to what we have seen.

Edward Argar: I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s point about the nature of coercive and controlling behaviour, and of domestic abuse and violence. As he says, we are dealing with highly manipulative people who, in some cases, will seek to make the victim feel as if they bear responsibility. Of course, in no way do they; the only responsibility rests with the perpetrator. He is absolutely right to highlight that point.

The legal issue that we are debating falls under the ministerial responsibilities of my colleague the noble Lord Bellamy KC, who covers matters such as family law, but it is important that I respond to this debate, not just because he is in the other place, but because there is clearly read-across to my responsibility as victims Minister.

The issue of parental responsibility is fundamentally important. It can shape the development of and relationship with a child. As the right hon. Gentleman and others highlighted, under by the Children Act 1989, “parental responsibility” refers to all the rights, duties, and responsibilities of parents or carers towards their children. That includes deciding where the child should go to school, live and go on holiday. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) said, the Act starts from a presumption that the child’s welfare and interests are paramount, and, to a degree, from the assumption that a child’s being with their parents, or that there is parental contact and responsibility, is the preferred approach.

As hon. Members have highlighted, legally, mothers and fathers automatically have parental responsibility. Courts can make orders to restrict their parental responsibility where that is in the child’s best interests, and depending on the circumstances, but it cannot be simply removed. I do not propose to reiterate at length the legal context, which the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside set out very clearly.

I have listened carefully to hon. Members’ arguments for changing the law so that that a parent convicted of the murder of the other parent has their parental responsibility automatically suspended during the period of their imprisonment. There is no doubt that, legally and emotionally, this is a complex and challenging topic, and I sympathise with the view that more should be done to ensure that the courts can better support bereaved families in such circumstances. I hasten to add that today is only my 11th day back in the Ministry of Justice, but I have reservations, some of which my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham alluded to, about whether an automatic suspension—the reversal that the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside talked about—is necessarily the best way of achieving the outcomes sought, given the legal context of the Children’s Act. I will unpick that in a moment.

The hon. Member for Bristol East and I may not have the same political perspective on everything, but throughout my time in this House, her contributions have always been thoughtful and considered, as were her remarks today. I will look up Children Heard and Seen, but I would be grateful if she sent me anything that she wanted to about that charity. In a previous role at the Ministry of Justice, I was responsible for pushing through the female offender strategy, which sought to reduce the use of prison when people—particularly mothers—were given short sentences for minor offences. There is cross-over with the work I am currently doing, so I would be grateful for anything she could share with me.

Kerry McCarthy: I am happy to do that, and I can give the Minister details of meetings we have had with Children Heard and Seen, attended by the previous children’s Minister and the previous prisons Minister. I agree with what the Minister just said, but he touches on something that Children Heard and Seen rail against. Quite a lot of work has been done, including by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and my predecessor, Baroness Corston, to try to ensure that women, particularly those with young children, are less likely to be imprisoned, but that, again, is prisoner-focused. The difference between that and Children Heard and Seen is that the latter is not about the prisoner. It is about the children and putting them first, so there is a slight difference.

Edward Argar: The context for what I said was this: the presumption behind the strategy was that the best interests of the child should be taken into consideration. I am going down the rabbit hole slightly here, but previously, a number of mothers would be sentenced for what would be deemed relatively minor offences—offences in which there was no violence against the person or similar. That would happen in circumstances where the mother had a functioning relationship with their child that was at risk of being broken. We sought to provide a little bit more discretion around that, to understand where it was a functioning relationship, and where it might work more effectively. Over the years, the tool that was being used had become blunt.

The hon. Lady asked how many children have a parent in prison. I do not know how many of my predecessors she has had this conversation with, but I will endeavour to find that data, because it would add to the debate.

Sarah Atherton: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I will make a little progress, and then I will come to my hon. Friend. The Children Act 1989, as hon. Members will know, starts from the presumption that the child’s welfare—the interests of the child—are paramount. Courts consider that when making decisions.

There are various safeguards already in place to protect children, and they have been set out by the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside. They include the duties of local authorities, and the private law orders available to family members in such circumstances, as well as mechanisms that courts can employ to restrict parental responsibility and prevent repeated and unreasonable court applications, or applications that pose a risk of harm. Courts have discretion, through the permissions hearing, to restrict the ability of a

[Edward Argar]

perpetrator—a convicted offender—to use the court process in a vexatious way. Finally, I will set out what more can be done to support families in such tragic cases, and the actions that the Government have taken so far.

Sarah Atherton: Going back to the female offender strategy that the Minister mentioned, I understand that there will be a pilot unit in Wales—a residential women's centre. I have been a strong advocate of ensuring that there is some sort of families unit there, so that as women progress towards the end of a sentence, they can be reintroduced to their family and learn parenting skills, and there is a seamless transition to living in the community when they are released. Will the Minister drop me a line on what is happening with the children's unit? I do not know whether he knows the answer now; if he does, that is great.

Edward Argar: I will answer briefly to avoid straying too far from the premise of the debate. Although I am no longer responsible for the female offender strategy, I will certainly ensure that the Minister of State for Prisons, Parole and Probation is made aware of my hon. Friend's point.

As the hon. Member for Bristol East said, we must look at the issues case by case; there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Each case is different. That is one of the reasons why there are reservations about having an automatic presumption, rather than letting the courts consider each case. It is important to note that under the Children Act 1989, the welfare of the child, rather than the views or interests of any adult, is the uppermost consideration in cases that come before the court.

In determining a child's welfare needs, the court will have regard to the factors set out in the welfare checklist in the Children Act, including the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child, the impact on the child of any change in circumstances, any harm that they have suffered or are at risk of suffering, and how capable an individual with parental responsibility is of genuinely meeting that child's needs and best interests.

In tragic cases such as Jade's, where one parent has been convicted of murdering the other, the responsible local authority has a duty to protect the child and ensure that they are safeguarded from harm. That may include initiating care proceedings to provide the child with a permanent or interim care arrangement. Such arrangements, as has been set out, can include family members such as grandparents being granted parental responsibility for the child, for example through the granting of a special guardianship order by the court.

The process needs the involvement of the court. Under the principles of the Children Act, and also under our law's underpinning principles, only a court can restrict or change parental rights. When it is in the child's best interests, and appropriate given the circumstances of the case, there are mechanisms whereby the court can restrict the parental responsibility of a parent, but that must be done through the court.

Rob Roberts: The Minister is being very generous with his time. On that point, he will know better than I do whether there is any mechanism to ask, for example,

a bunch of family court judges or High Court judges whether they would be in favour of making the suspension of parental responsibility apply automatically. That would mean that if they hand down a conviction for the murder of another parent, it would automatically form part of the sentence. Could we ask judges that and see what their opinion is, or is that not something that we do?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Member. He is kind to presume that I am as expert 11 days in as I was when I had held this brief for many years, but there is a fair amount that I have kept close to. It is challenging. We must recognise the independence of our judiciary and the very clear delineation between judiciary and politics, but we routinely seek the views and advice of the judiciary. In a moment, I will turn to something that we may be able to do in this space.

Mark Tami: That sounds all well and good, but it ignores the reality of where we are and what the family have been through. They have suffered the loss of their daughter in horrific circumstances; we have not gone into the detail today. Asking them effectively to go through that again to get something that they rightly, in my view, assumed would be the case anyway puts a hell of a strain on them. In many cases, people might decide not to go down that road, because they cannot put themselves and their family through it.

Edward Argar: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight that. I would find it difficult to articulate as eloquently as he did not only how horrific the original events were but how horrific the possibility of reliving them, in a sense, by having to go through a court process, is. It may disappoint him, but I will seek to move things forward a little later in my remarks. We come back to that point in the Children Act 1989: the presumption of the role of the court. There will always be an element of that court process necessary under the presumptions that were built into that groundbreaking piece of legislation.

I also highlight that, as I mentioned, under section 91(14) of the Act the court can prevent a parent from bringing or making applications to the court without the court's prior permission, in particular where their doing so may cause harm or distress to the children or other parties involved in the case. That may not entirely remove the problem, but it gives the courts a route to prevent the vexatious use of the legal process to try to re-traumatise or re-victimise a family. Judges would consider that, and would have the power to prevent such an application where multiple applications were being used to cause harm and upset.

As I said, I have heard the calls today to change the law so that a parent convicted of murdering the other parent would have their parental responsibility automatically suspended during imprisonment. I think the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside characterised it as essentially a reversal of the presumption in this case. I have to say I am truly sympathetic, particularly given the case at hand. I cannot imagine anyone not being so, having heard the right hon. Gentleman and being aware of the circumstances of the case. However, the courts have mechanisms both to make orders to give parental responsibility to family members and to restrict it significantly in appropriate cases, but always through

the prism of their interpretation of the child's welfare and best interests. Every family is different, as is each set of circumstances that families find themselves in. Our view is that it is important that courts continue to have the flexibility that the Children Act gives them to make decisions that are tailored to the unique life of every child.

The legal challenge to the concept of automatic suspension is that it risks not aligning with the existing principles underpinning that key piece of legislation—the 1989 Act—and the way it works. There is a genuine risk that if we set up a mechanism to suspend parental responsibility automatically in certain circumstances, without affording the court the opportunity to hear all the arguments or evidence in the case, that would undermine the fundamentals of the framework in the Act. I recognise that in situations where one parent is convicted of the murder of the other, the process of obtaining the legal redress and the orders that I have set out today can be time-consuming, and that making or responding to court applications and attending multiple court hearings on related issues can be psychologically horrendous for those involved and can re-traumatise people who are just beginning to rebuild their lives.

I therefore want to outline an offer: two measures that the Government are taking to improve matters for families in such circumstances. I fear I may not go as far as the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside might wish, but I hope it might be a further step forward. I know him to be a reasonable man, so he may, without prejudice and without in any way resiling from his clear view on what needs to be done, take up the offer of these measures—I suspect and hope he will.

First, the right hon. Gentleman highlighted the issue about cost and he will be aware that on 17 October we laid before the House secondary legislation to expand the scope of legal aid to applications for special guardianship orders. That means that when a private individual such as a family member wishes to become a special guardian, they can receive legal aid advice and representation to help. A successful application to be a special guardian will result in that individual having parental responsibility for a child or children.

Secondly, having heard the arguments made today and having read and carefully reflected on the petition and my predecessor's response to it, I will ask the family procedure rule committee to consider what opportunities there will be for procedures to be expedited or otherwise adjusted so that, in circumstances such as these, applications for special guardianship or other orders as well as applications to restrict parental responsibility can be made with as few procedural burdens, and as swiftly, as possible. It will be for the rule committee to consider that request, but it is a request that we will make. That would have the benefit of maintaining the Children Act

and existing legal mechanisms and principles for courts to assess matters on a case-by-case basis, tailored to the child, but it would, I hope, reduce the trauma and burden that those processes can place on people.

In short, we believe that it is right to limit the parental responsibility of those who hold it if that is deemed to be for the welfare and in the best interests of the child, and that it is right that that power is exercised by the courts and that they have the powers at their disposal to make these orders. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate, and I thank the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside for securing it. I suspect he has spoken to many Ministers, but I will consider very carefully the points that have been made. If he wishes to take me up on my offer, I will meet him and Lord Bellamy, who is the lead for family law in the Department. If he will allow me to join that meeting, as the victims Minister, I would be happy to further discuss the points that have been raised this afternoon and how we can best deliver on our commitment to safeguard children while ensuring that their best interests remain the utmost priority.

5.55 pm

Mark Tami: I thank the hon. Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton), my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), the hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts), and my hon. Friends the Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for their contributions. It has been a good debate and we have addressed a lot of the issues.

Clearly, I would have liked the Minister to say, "Yes, we will do this straightaway," but I recognise that these things never quite happen in that way. I will certainly take him up on his kind offer of a meeting, and I hope we can move forward.

I certainly welcome the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge, who said that a future Labour Government would introduce this change. I hope we can do so before that, because I do not see this as a political issue. The vast majority of people in this House and the vast majority of people out there believe change is needed now. I once again thank Jade's family and Edwin for all the work they have done to bring this issue to the House today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 614893, relating to suspension of parental responsibility for people convicted of serious offences.

5.56 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 7 November 2022

TREASURY

Bank of England Asset Purchase Facility

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): The Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England decided at its meeting ending on 3 February 2022 to reduce the stock of UK Government bonds (gilts) and sterling non-financial investment-grade corporate bonds held in the Asset Purchase Facility by ceasing to reinvest maturing securities.

On 28 September 2022, in line with the Bank's financial stability objective, the APF carried out purchases of long-dated gilts to restore orderly market conditions. This was then expanded on 11 October to include index-linked gilts. As noted in the written ministerial statement of 12 October 2022^[1] the authorised total size of the APF was increased from £866 billion to £966 billion at the time to allow for a time-limited intervention.

Total gilt purchases under this financial stability operation reached £19.3 billion when the daily auctions ended as planned on 14 October. I have therefore agreed to reduce the authorised maximum size of the APF from £966 billion, as was agreed on 28 September 2022, to £886 billion. This reduction reflects the unused portion of the recent £100 billion financial stability related APF expansion.

The Governor and I will continue to jointly agree the authorised maximum size of monetary policy related asset purchases every six months, as the size of APF holdings reduces, to reflect the size of the portfolio. This month a further reduction in the authorised maximum size of the APF will be agreed in relation to the ongoing unwind of assets acquired for monetary policy purposes.

The risk control framework previously agreed with the Bank will remain in place, and HM Treasury will continue to monitor risks to public funds from the APF through regular risk oversight meetings and enhanced information sharing with the Bank.

There will continue to be an opportunity for HM Treasury to provide views to the MPC on the design of the schemes within the APF, as they affect the Government's broader economic objectives and may pose risks to the Exchequer.

The Government will continue to indemnify the Bank, and the Bank of England Asset Purchase Facility Fund (BEAPFF), from any losses arising out of, or in connection with, the facility. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

A full departmental minute has been laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

^[1] <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2022-10-12/hcws319>

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Arts Council England 2023-2026 Investment Programme: Announcement of National Portfolio Organisation

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan): Further to the written statement made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries) on 23 February 2022, I would like to update the House on Arts Council England's 2023-2026 investment programme. The provisional outcome of this competitive funding round has been communicated to applicants, and will see 990 national portfolio organisations and investment principles support organisations offered £446 million per annum in funding over the next three years.

These provisional offers fulfil the ambitious and challenging targets set for Arts Council England by my predecessor. Specifically—including national lottery funding—these offers would see nearly an extra £45 million in each of 2023-24 and 2024-25 invested outside of London, rising to nearly £53 million extra in 2025-26. This will result in 215 new organisations being funded outside of London—a net increase of 135 organisations. This extra investment outside London is supported largely by the overall uplifts agreed by the Government at the comprehensive spending review, and Arts Council England decisions about its use of national lottery funding.

DCMS worked with Arts Council England to agree on a list of 109 levelling up for culture places, which are areas identified as having historically low cultural engagement. The provisional funding offers that have been announced will increase the number of funded organisations in levelling up for culture places by 79%—from 107 to 192 organisations—and will increase the level of investment in levelling up for culture places by 95%, or £21.2 million per annum. This funding will play a vital role in fulfilling the Government's intention to tackle cultural disparities, and ensure that everyone, wherever they live, has the opportunity to enjoy the incredible benefits of culture in their lives.

Funding agreements will be finalised over the next few months, so are subject to change, but alongside the levelling-up progress that has been made, I would like to highlight the following:

- 10% of all library services in England are now national portfolio organisations;

- 20% more organisations will be funded to deliver work for children and young people, with a total of 79% of the portfolio delivering activity specifically for children and young people, up by six percentage points from the 2018-2022 portfolio;

- Improved diversity on boards;

- Overall more days of cultural activity provided.

Finally, it should be noted that these are preliminary decisions which will be negotiated further with organisations. Arts Council England will need to work closely with organisations to review the aims previously submitted in their applications for this programme to ensure they are still achievable in the current economic context. In particular, my predecessor asked all organisations receiving more than £2 million per annum to work to increase

their outreach to levelling up for culture places by 15% as a cohort. Given the economic challenges, this target will not apply for this funding round, noting the considerable outreach work these organisations are already doing.

Arts Council England will also support organisations leaving the portfolio by providing transition funding, and I am glad to inform the House that it has been able to more than double the budget for this. This means that any organisation currently in the portfolio, but due to leave, will have the opportunity to apply for funding to support them until next October while they adjust to their changed income.

I am sure Members across the House will be interested to see the outcomes in their local area, and I would direct them to the Arts Council website where all the provisional offers are listed.

[HCWS357]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Just Energy Transition Guarantee: South Africa

The Minister for Development (Mr Andrew Mitchell):

It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain

from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the statement, except in cases of special urgency.

I have today laid a departmental minute outlining details of a new liability being undertaken by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to support South Africa's Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP). This guarantee will reduce the impact of climate change and support an important legacy of the UK's COP presidency, the Just Energy Transition Partnership with South Africa. The \$1 billion guarantee facility will support projects in South Africa's JETP investment plan, which has been drafted by the South African Government with the input of international partners—the United States, the UK, the European Union, France and Germany. The investment plan sets out areas for investment in renewable energy, hydrogen, electric vehicles and the coal mining region.

An announcement on the South Africa Just Energy Transition Partnership is expected to be made at COP27, which is between 6 and 18 November 2022. Any announcement on this UK guarantee will note that the guarantee is subject to the parliamentary notification process being completed. The Public Accounts Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee and the International Development Committee have been notified of this.

FCDO Ministers and HM Treasury have approved this guarantee proposal. If, during the next 14 parliamentary sitting days, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or by otherwise raising the matter in Parliament, final approval to proceed with incurring the liability will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

[HCWS358]

Petitions

Monday 7 November 2022

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Ramsgate Town Council and Manston Airport

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Transport has granted the Manston site development consent (a DCO) so that a new cargo hub and associated businesses can be advanced. The project is promoted by RiverOak Strategic Partners Limited and has long enjoyed the support of both Thanet MPs.

Thanet perpetually has unemployment rates and average salaries behind South-East norms. A re-opened airport is expected to bring huge investment of hundreds of millions of pounds. This means new opportunities and a huge number of new jobs.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Ramsgate Town Council to accept the decision of the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Transport, work constructively with the Government, RSP, Thanet's MPs and other local authorities and elected representatives towards the re-opening of the airport, and to refrain from spending more public money on further legal challenges.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Craig Mackinlay, *Official Report*, 26 October 2022; Vol. 721, c. 372.]

[P002776]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Richard Holden):

The Manston Airport development consent order allows for the redevelopment and reopening of the Manston Airport site into a dedicated air freight facility. The reopened airport will handle at least 10,000 air cargo movements per year while also offering general aviation, passenger, executive travel and aircraft engineering services.

The application for the Manston Airport project was first granted development consent on 9 July 2020. This decision was quashed by the High Court on 15 February 2021 on the basis that the decision letter did not set out sufficient reasons for granting the application. The quashing of the decision meant that the application needed to be redetermined, and the 18 August 2022 decision is the re-taken decision following the redetermination of the application.

A judicial review claim for the 18 August 2022 decision was filed within the six-week challenge period for that decision. How a case for judicial review is funded is a matter for the claimant and is not something the Department is able to comment on.

TREASURY

Windfall tax

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that soaring energy bills are driving the biggest fall in living standards in living memory; further that, to ensure that the needs of people are put ahead of the profits of energy giants, we need bold action including freezes to the energy price cap, energy firms brought into public ownership and the rolling-out of a mass programme of home insulation; further that we must also urgently tackle the eye-watering level of profits that North Sea oil and gas companies are making on the backs of higher bills for ordinary people; notes that the Conservative Government's Windfall Tax is set far too low and lets oil and gas giants off the hook as they are continuing to make vast undeserved profits at levels way beyond what they had ever expected.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to review proposals to at least double the Windfall Tax so that oil and gas firms do not make a single penny in excess profits out of this crisis, and use the billions in additional funding to help people through the cost-of-living emergency.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Richard Burgon, *Official Report*, 7 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 347.]

[P002765]

Observations from The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartledge):

The Government thank the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) for submitting the petition alongside the corresponding online petition.

The Government understand that people across the UK are worried about the cost of living and are seeing their disposable incomes decrease as they spend more on essentials.

That is why £37 billion-worth of support for the cost of living is being provided for this financial year: The Government have taken decisive action to support millions of households and businesses with rising energy costs this winter through the energy price guarantee and the energy bill relief scheme.

The energy price guarantee caps the unit price households pay for electricity and gas, which means that a typical household in Great Britain will have no more than the equivalent of £2,500 a year on their energy bills this winter. This is expected to save consumers who use both gas and electricity around £700 this winter.

In addition to the energy price guarantee, millions of the most vulnerable households will receive £1,200 of support this year through the £400 energy bill support scheme, the £150 council tax rebate and the one-off £650 cost of living payment for those on means-tested benefits, with additional support for pensioners and those claiming disability benefits.

Through the EBRs, the Government will provide a discount on wholesale gas and electricity prices for all non-domestic consumers, including UK businesses, and the voluntary and public sectors. This is a temporary measure that will protect them from soaring energy costs and provide them with the certainty they need to plan through the acute crisis this winter. It applies to energy usage from 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023. It

is the Government's intention that, after this winter, support targets only the most vulnerable businesses. A Treasury-led review will consider how best to deliver these objectives.

The Government are continuing to keep the situation under review and to focus support on the most vulnerable while ensuring we act in a fiscally responsible way.

As well as providing direct financial support for households, the Government have also set out robust plans to improve the efficiency of peoples' homes. This includes £6.6 billion this Parliament to improve energy efficiency of buildings and our energy security.

The Government have confirmed that they will expand the energy company obligation by £1 billion over the next three years, starting from April 2023. The ECO is a Government energy efficiency scheme in Great Britain to help reduce carbon emissions and tackle fuel poverty. Support will be targeted at those most vulnerable but will also be available for the least efficient homes in lower council tax bands. Combined with previous announcements, ECO is expected to leverage over £5 billion between 2022 and 2026 to support energy efficiency.

The Government are also acting in other areas to support energy efficiency. As announced in the 2022 spring statement, the Government are removing the 5% VAT charge on the installation of energy-efficiency materials in Great Britain over the next five years and permanently reversing restrictions imposed by the Court of Justice of the European Union, removing complex eligibility conditions and reinstating wind and water turbines as

qualifying materials. This represents a £280 million tax cut to support investment in energy efficiency over the next five years.

In order to help fund the financial support for UK families, and in response to sharp increases in oil and gas prices over the past year, the energy profits levy was introduced from 26 May 2022. The levy is a new 25% surcharge on the extraordinary profits that the oil and gas sector are making, taking the combined headline tax rate on UK oil and gas profits to 65%. This is an additional and temporary tax which reflects the extraordinary global context. While it is in place, the levy ensures that the windfall profits that the oil and gas companies have received are taxed fairly, but that they have ample incentives to continue to invest at the same time. This is a balanced approach to raise revenue for households facing significant cost of living pressures while encouraging investment from a sector that is vital for a more independent and secure home-grown energy system.

The Government have been clear that they want to see the oil and gas sector reinvest profits to support the economy, jobs and the UK's energy security. That is why, within the levy, a new "super-deduction" style relief has been introduced to encourage firms to invest in oil and gas extraction in the UK. The Government expect the combination of the levy and this investment allowance to lead to an overall increase in investment.

The Government's latest projections indicate that the levy is expected to raise over £7 billion in 2022-23, and around £28 billion over the period 2025-26.

Ministerial Correction

Monday 7 November 2022

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Abuse and Deaths in Secure Mental Health Units

The following is an extract from the response to the urgent question asked by the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) on abuse and deaths in secure mental health units on 3 November 2022.

Maria Caulfield: NHS England has commissioned a system-wide investigation into the safety and quality of services across the board, particularly around children and adolescent mental health services. I am pushing for those investigations to be as swift as possible.

[Official Report, 3 November 2022, Vol. 721, c. 1020.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield).

An error has been identified in my response to the urgent question on abuse and deaths in secure mental health units.

The correct response should have been:

Maria Caulfield: NHS England has commissioned a system-wide investigation into the safety and quality of services **at the Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust**, particularly around children and adolescent mental health services. I am pushing for those investigations to be as swift as possible.

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