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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 22 November 2022

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Social Security Benefits Tribunal Hearing: Waiting Times

1. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What the average waiting time is for a social security benefits tribunal hearing in (a) Northamptonshire and (b) England. [902341]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): Between April and June 2022, the average waiting time for benefits appeals in Northamptonshire was 46 weeks. In England it was 28 weeks. Waiting times can fluctuate due to a number of factors, including volumes of benefit decisions made locally, the complexity of the case, the availability of panel members and venue capacity.

Mr Hollobone: When I asked the same question three years ago, the figures were 21 weeks for Northamptonshire and 33 weeks across England. While there has been improvement across the country as a whole, clearly things are going backwards quite severely in Northamptonshire. Does the Minister share my concern that this is clearly an unacceptable situation, and will he outline plans to tackle it?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend is spot on: it is not acceptable that his area is going backwards. I have commissioned officials to report in detail on the exact problems affecting his area, and I will report to him in the next four to six weeks.

Common Platform

2. **Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the Common Platform on the delivery of justice by HM Courts and Tribunals Service. [902342]

13. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve the performance of the Common Platform. [902356]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): We have rolled out the Common Platform at 173 criminal courts in England and Wales and 76% of courts are now live. It has improved the format and timeliness of outcomes of hearings generated and shared with our criminal justice partner agencies and removed the need for staff to re-key information across different

IT systems. If we are to reform the criminal justice system, we need to press ahead and reform the IT that underpins it.

Kate Hollern: The Common Platform has been nothing short of a disaster—one quarter of a billion wasted on a project that was fundamentally flawed from the start and designed primarily to slash thousands of highly skilled legal jobs. Even the Lord Chief Justice has raised serious concerns recently to the Justice Committee. Is it not time the Minister held up his hands, admitted this was a mistake and told His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service to build a better system that focuses on delivering justice instead of wasting money in such a damaging and short-sighted way?

Mike Freer: The simple answer to that question is no.

Rachel Hopkins: Last month, staff at courts across the country, including the magistrates court in Luton, went on strike—not over pay or pensions, but because the Common Platform IT system is so flawed that it is effectively unusable. That should have been enough to make the Government sit up and take notice, but if the Minister will not listen to his own workers and their trade union, the Public and Commercial Services Union, maybe he will listen to the judges who are speaking out? One judge called the Common Platform “completely unsuitable” and “not fit for purpose”. Does the Minister agree?

Mike Freer: No, I do not agree. All new IT systems take time to bed down and officials continue to work with user groups, both staff within the criminal justice system and judges. The system replaces eight legacy systems that are at the end of their lives, support for which is being withdrawn. If we do not reform the IT system underpinning the criminal justice system, we will not be able to make the progress we wish.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Sir Robert Neill.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Minister is of course right to say that we need to modernise and improve IT systems and replace the legacy systems, but will he sit down and talk in some detail with users of the system, both judges and practitioners? For example, a platform that is unable to record whether a case concludes in a guilty plea will not be very much help in tracking the progress of cases or improving listing at a time when we have massive backlogs. Practical changes are surely what is needed.

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I am always happy to speak to staff groups and my legal friends in the justice system to iron out any particular issues, but the roll-out of the Common Platform needs to continue.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Alex Cunningham.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Oh dear, dear, what a mess: our courts systems were in chaos before the pandemic, and now it is much worse, with some cases taking years to come to court and remand

numbers at record levels. The Common Platform was supposed to make courts more efficient, but fails in everything from recording criminal convictions to getting crucial data to the Registry Trust on time. Worst of all, it is having an adverse effect on people's lives, including those who use it. Costs have soared from £236 million to more than £300 million, with Ministers ready to pay an IT firm another £20 million for product enhancements. Will the Minister tell us where the money has gone, why the system has not been sorted and whether he will pause the roll-out until it is?

Mike Freer: I point out that the backlogs were on a downward trajectory until the Criminal Bar Association action. The roll-out of the Common Platform is a necessary part of modernising our systems, and I am confident that we will ensure that the system is delivered for the benefit not just of users, but of everyone who touches our criminal justice system.

Males Convicted under Joint Enterprise: Black and other Ethnic Groups

3. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make an estimate of the number and proportion of males convicted under joint enterprise who were (a) Black and (b) from other ethnic groups. [902344]

Mr Speaker: Welcome, Minister.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker—it is nice to be back in the Ministry of Justice after an absence of a little over three years.

Data is collated on the ethnicity of defendants who are prosecuted and convicted of a criminal offence, but not on whether that crime was part of joint enterprise. We are, however, considering whether such data could be collected as part of the Common Platform programme. The Common Platform aims, as Members will have heard, to provide a single case management system that will enable the sharing of evidence and case information across the criminal justice system.

Kate Osamor: Members have been hearing for nearly a decade that the data will be released soon, but nothing ever comes of it. What possible excuse can there be for not being open about which prisoners have been convicted under this discredited and biased doctrine and which have not? It is that the data would clearly show how joint enterprise has been used to target black people disproportionately, particularly young black men.

Edward Argar: On the hon. Lady's first point, we are unable at this stage to give a firm timescale for that data because capturing data on joint enterprise will depend on the level of change needed to the Common Platform and on the cost and work required to develop, test and implement it. On her broader point, the Government recognise that convictions based on joint enterprise appear from some studies to affect black, Asian and minority ethnic groups disproportionately. However, I assure her that the Crown Prosecution Service can only apply the law when making decisions, and race or ethnicity should play no part in any such decision making. We recognise the importance of the law of

joint enterprise, and the consequences it can have for defendants and their families as well as for victims and their families.

Family Court: Waiting Lists

4. **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the size of waiting lists for family court cases. [902345]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): We established the family mediation voucher scheme in March 2021 to help to reduce the number of private law cases coming into court. We have invested nearly £9 million to date and issued more than 12,800 vouchers to support families. In 2021, family sitting days were at their highest level ever. In July, we introduced a regional virtual court pilot to allow deputy district judges from other regions to sit virtually in London and the south-east so that they can hear as many cases as possible.

Duncan Baker: We all know that there are significant backlogs in the family court system. However, what some might not know is that it is having real knock-on effects on families, single parents and children across the country. The sooner those cases can be heard and dealt with, the better for everybody involved. What does my hon. Friend intend to do to address those backlogs, and what specific measures is he taking to ensure that there are enough judges and adequate funding for our family courts?

Mike Freer: My understanding is that the voucher scheme has been successful, and that about 65% of families who have used it say that it kept them out of the court process. It is our intention to ensure that the voucher scheme continues, with additional publicity. To address some of the other issues relating to capacity, using the virtual courtroom is a possibility, and the general recruitment of more than 1,000 new judges should help.

Andy Slaught (Hammersmith) (Lab): Government figures show that, as of last week, the backlog in the family courts now stands at more than 110,000 cases. Given that the Ministry of Justice budget will go up by about half the rate of inflation next year—meaning a real-terms cut of hundreds of millions of pounds—does the Minister think that this and other backlogs will go up or down?

Mike Freer: Our intention is to ensure that the backlogs go down by ensuring that as many families as possible are kept out of the court system through the use of schemes such as the family mediation voucher scheme.

Strengthening Human Rights: Discussions with Cabinet Colleagues

5. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on strengthening human rights. [902346]

6. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on strengthening human rights. [902347]

8. **Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on strengthening human rights. [902349]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): We have introduced the Bill of Rights and look forward to bringing it forward for Second Reading shortly so that we can strengthen quintessential UK rights such as freedom of speech, as well as deporting more foreign national offenders and restoring some common sense to our justice system.

Gavin Newlands: Given his last stint in the role, the entire legal sector was—how should I put this?—rather surprised when the Secretary of State was reappointed, and they are not alone. The former Lord Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) called his Bill of Rights “worse than useless”. The former Northern Ireland Secretary, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) called it “wrong headed and regressive”. Other Ministers described it as “a complete mess”. If that is what his friends think, the House can only imagine what we in the Scottish National party think about this measure. Can the Secretary of State tell us why his own colleagues do not think his pet project is required or desirable?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is wrong on all counts. I am confident that—[*Interruption.*] He can quote anonymous sources, and there are some well-known differences of opinion, but I can confidently predict that on Second Reading, the Bill of Rights will have overwhelming support in this House. He cited academics, but I point to Lord Faulks KC, Oliver Sells KC, Jonathan Fisher KC, Steven Barrett KC and John Larkin KC, former Attorney General for Northern Ireland, all of whom have very much welcomed the proposals.

Kirsten Oswald: Four out of the five parties in the Scottish Parliament are committed to protecting the Human Rights Act. That view is shared by the party of Government in Wales, it constitutes the majority position in Northern Ireland and it is shared by more than 40% of MPs here, who collectively represent a clear majority of the electorate. Does the Secretary of State not see that by pushing his proposed Bill, he is trampling on the will of the devolved Administrations, but also on the views of the majority of the public?

Dominic Raab: I am afraid I do not accept that. It was a manifesto commitment. The Human Rights Act is a UK-wide piece of legislation and a protected enactment under the devolution settlements. Amending it is therefore a matter for the UK Parliament. I have been to all the devolved Administrations and talked to all the Executives. I have had roundtables with all the relevant stakeholders, as have fellow Ministers. We continue to be committed to working with the devolved Administrations in Scotland and elsewhere to ensure that the reforms work well and benefit people across the UK.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Scotland’s Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government pointed out this month that the Human Rights Act has a 22-year record of delivering justice, including for some of the most vulnerable people in communities across

the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Given how the Act is woven into the very fabric of the constitutional settlements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and how it benefits us all, will the Secretary of State accept that it is not in his power or that of his Government to unilaterally unpick that on behalf of the other nations of the United Kingdom?

Dominic Raab: What I will say to the hon. Gentleman is that this was a manifesto commitment. We are not removing the European convention on human rights—indeed, it will stay, as it was under the Human Rights Act, in a schedule to the Bill of Rights—but I do think that the idea that the Human Rights Act was the last word on human rights in UK constitutional history is daft. Actually, there is an opportunity to strengthen things such as free speech to the benefit of people across the United Kingdom, but also to deal with problems and abuses of the system, particularly things such as foreign national offenders abusing the right of article 8—the right to a family life—to avoid deportation. I suspect that that is as popular in Scotland as it is across the rest of the United Kingdom.

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

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is carers, victims of domestic violence, disabled people, trafficking victims and people with mental health issues who are among those who have vindicated crucial rights and tackled Government discrimination using the Human Rights Act. Their victories could not have happened under his Bill. As we face up to the cost of living crisis, should we not be strengthening our citizens’ rights rather than undermining them? Why does he want to put people in the UK into a second-tier system of rights protection?

Dominic Raab: A series of cases have been put about that either would not be affected by the Bill of Rights or were not the product, in terms of the remedy, of the Human Rights Act. I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s assertion; I want to work with hon. Members from all parts of the House. There is a great opportunity to strengthen the UK tradition of human rights—I think we should be proud of that as one United Kingdom—but to deal also with the elastic interpretation of rights and the shifting goalposts that have undermined the credibility of human rights and put huge pressure and strains on our ability to protect the public.

Stuart C. McDonald: The only thing undermining human rights protections in this country is the Justice Secretary’s proposed Bill of Rights. The reality is that a nursery class could have designed a more sensible piece of legislation than his Bill of Rights. Everybody from human rights campaigners to big city lawyers are saying so—indeed, even the disastrous Truss Administration understood that fact. Given the universal criticism, what exactly is it that makes him think he can just carry on regardless, without even a further consultation?

Dominic Raab: I am afraid I do not accept that characterisation. I think that on Second Reading, the hon. Gentleman will see the level of support. There has already been consultation on not just the policy proposals

but specific clauses. We have looked at this at length. It is a manifesto commitment dating back to 2010. It remains one today, and we are going to deliver it for the British people.

Isle of Wight Constituency: Camp Hill Site

7. **Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): What plans he has for the Camp Hill site in Isle of Wight constituency. [902348]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): As my hon. Friend knows, HM Prison Camp Hill in his constituency was closed in 2013. We are currently exploring options for a number of decommissioned prison sites, including Camp Hill.

Bob Seely: Do Ministers agree that one way the Government can drive economic growth is through quicker decision making? As the Minister has admitted, we have waited nearly a decade for an answer on Camp Hill. Do Ministers understand, and have they taken on board, that our preferred option on the Isle of Wight is for the Camp Hill site to be sold to the council at a price it can afford—we have done that with the Columbine building in East Cowes—so that we can use that land for jobs, housing and development, taking pressure off greenfield sites and creating wealth on the Island, rather than having this valuable site stand empty for such a long time?

Damian Hinds: First, I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of making timely decisions on all such matters. I also hear what he says; transferring that site to Isle of Wight Council is one of the options being looked at, among others. I know that MOJ officials have been speaking to the council, and I commit to my hon. Friend that they will continue to do so.

Criminal Justice System: Support for Victims

9. **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support victims in the criminal justice system. [902352]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): In May, we published our landmark draft Victims Bill and a wider package of measures to improve victims' experience of the criminal justice system. We will respond to the Select Committee's scrutiny of that shortly.

Judith Cummins: The victims of crime matter, but it has been seven years and six Justice Secretaries since the Victims Bill was first promised, and it still has not made it to the statute book. Why are the victims of crime not a priority for this Government?

Dominic Raab: I say gently to the hon. Lady that I do not accept that characterisation. The Victims Bill had to go through pre-legislative scrutiny; it was right that it should do that. We are now ready to bring it forward, as and when parliamentary time allows. We will also be including a victim surcharge. Alongside these measures, we are increasing the funding for victims and witness support—we are actually quadrupling it compared with the last Labour Government, which ought to show that it is the Conservatives who are standing up for victims and the public when it comes to fighting crime.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am actually reassured by my right hon. Friend's comments about the Victims Bill. We need this Bill, and he is aware of my long-standing support for it. With this Bill, the victims of crime cannot be forgotten, including my constituents who have been let down by the courts and the Crown Prosecution Service, which must be held to account when it comes to securing compensation for victims of crime, because the perpetrators are getting off too lightly. These are fundamental areas that the Victims Bill must put forward. May I urge him to give me a commitment today that these areas will not be forgotten?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I pay tribute to her for all the work we did together on these issues, and what a stalwart, doughty supporter she has been. The Victims Bill will place the victims code into law. It will increase oversight of how the criminal justice agencies work, both at the police and crime commissioner level and in the national inspections. I mentioned the increase in funding for victims. The increase in the victim surcharge will mean that we have more restorative justice, with offenders paying for the wrongs they have done and victims getting extra compensation.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I find myself in agreement with the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), whose Government, of course, have been in power for 12 years. The court delays are a real problem for victims. One of my constituents was violently attacked and given a court date three years later. Her seven-year-old witnessed the attack, and the perpetrator keeps pestering her, breaking non-molestation orders, leaving the police pretty powerless, because he knows there is no traction. The Public Accounts Committee has looked into this. The backlog is not going down and will not be lower than pre-pandemic—it is not about covid. What is the Secretary of State doing to get a grip on his Department and make sure the courts deliver justice for victims?

Dominic Raab: I say to the hon. Lady that the Crown court backlog reduced from more than 60,000 cases in June 2021 to under 58,000 cases at the end of March 2022—[*Interruption.*] Hold on. The increase and the reversal of that trajectory were the result of the Criminal Bar Association's strike action, which was unwarranted—[*Interruption.*] I am looking at Opposition Front Benchers. When we announced our proposals on the legal aid review, they agreed with every single one. Yet again, when it comes to the justice system, as with many other things, they are on the side not of the public, but of those who take disruptive industrial action.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The best way to support victims is better criminal law. The Government have done much to tackle violence against women and girls, but the law still fails anyone who discovers a fake or real nude image of themselves that has been posted online without their consent. I suggest that my right hon. Friend looks at including in the Online Safety Bill, which is hopefully about to come back to this place on Report, an amendment to address that once and for all, particularly in the light of the Law Commission's recommendations, which were finalised some five months ago.

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend for her incredible work in this area. As ever, I listen to her carefully. I reassure her that I am looking positively and actively at bringing forward legislative changes in this area, and I will confirm the vehicle for that shortly.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I am sure the Secretary of State will share my concern about a local case whereby a man who had pleaded guilty to sexually abusing two girls was given permission by the judge to go abroad on holiday while awaiting sentencing. Does the Secretary of State agree that that is totally unacceptable and that measures must be taken to stop it happening again?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot comment on individual judicial cases, but I understand the concern in such cases. Of course, if he wishes to write to me with the details, I will be happy to look at that very carefully.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Two of my constituents who were subjected to a vicious, unprovoked knife attack, as well as many others in the bay, felt let down by the justice system due to the level of sentence that was applied. They continue to feel let down by not getting information about someone who was connected with that series of offences. Will my right hon. Friend, or the relevant victims Minister, meet me to discuss that case and what we can do about it?

Dominic Raab: I will certainly ensure that my hon. Friend gets a meeting with the victims Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar). I will not comment on individual cases, but we have increased sentencing substantially through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, against which Opposition Members voted. In individual cases, however, it is of course for the judiciary to decide and that discretion is important.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Anna McMorrin.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): My constituent Sarah was sexually assaulted. After a three-year wait and a hugely traumatic trial, the defendant was found not guilty. Of her experiences in the criminal justice system, she said:

“I felt like I was being publicly beaten and humiliated. I wouldn’t advise anyone to go through it, they destroy you.”

Can the Secretary of State tell me how survivors such as Sarah are supposed to trust the Government when, seven years on, we are still waiting for the victims Bill and he is under investigation for bullying?

Dominic Raab: I am afraid that the hon. Lady rather demeaned the important point that she was making by trying to score political points at the end. Let me answer directly: we appreciate the concerns that there are for any victim, particularly female victims of crime, whether that is sexual violence or non-sexual violence. That is why we have rolled out section 28 of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999, which provides the opportunity to give pre-recorded evidence, and why, when we have the Victims Bill—

Anna McMorrin: Where is it?

Dominic Raab: It has been going through pre-legislative scrutiny and it is important to respond to that. It will increase the oversight of all elements of the criminal justice system, both at the PCC level—the local level—and at the national inspectorate level. One thing that, notwithstanding the fiscal event, I am committed to protecting is the quantum leap in support and funding for victims, which has quadrupled under this Government compared with the last Labour Government.

Death Registration Process

10. **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on reforming the death registration process. [902353]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): The Ministry of Justice is working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care and the General Register Office on the implementation of a statutory medical examiners scheme, which will provide an additional layer of scrutiny on cause of death in non-coronal cases. We are also working with the General Register Office to consider how families might play a greater role in the registration of their loved ones’ deaths following an inquest.

Imran Hussain: I thank the Minister for that response. For many of my constituents, a swift burial is a core tenet of their beliefs and faith, but in many cases this swift burial is held back by bureaucratic legal difficulties in formally registering the death, particularly when GPs cannot be reached, there is a bank holiday or it is the weekend. I think the whole House will agree that no one wants their relatives to be held in a mortuary any longer than is absolutely necessary. Will the Minister meet me and colleagues from the Department of Health and Social Care to discuss what can be done to break down these legal barriers and address these issues so that everybody can be afforded dignity in death?

Mike Freer: First, I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that I have discussed this specific issue of how faith communities are dealt with by the coroners service. I have discussed it with the Chief Coroner, and I have a meeting next week with representatives of both the Jewish and the Muslim faiths. Once I have had those meetings, I would be very happy to meet him so that, having looked at the issue in the round, we can discuss how we can move forward.

Parental Imprisonment

11. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): If he will take steps with prisons to estimate the number of children affected by parental imprisonment. [902354]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): Yes, I certainly will. I agree about the effects that parental imprisonment has, and I certainly agree that it is important to understand the number of children this affects.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Minister for that response. I have previously had meetings with former Justice Ministers, Children’s Ministers and so on. We absolutely need this data because we think there could be hundreds of thousands of children affected over the years. Not only is it really traumatic for them, but it puts them at risk themselves. Once we have the data, we can look at

support services, but may I urge him to do what he can to work with prisons, schools and local authorities to try to make sure there is a comprehensive database?

Damian Hinds: I agree. I have spoken to one of my predecessor Ministers—my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins)—about the conversation she had with the hon. Lady. I was also reading with interest the hon. Lady's speech in Westminster Hall the other day, and about the work of the charity Children Heard and Seen. She is absolutely right that the first step and the basis has to be the data, and there is important work under way, including changes to the basic custody screening process, and then the big cross-Government project called "Better Outcomes through Linked Data", and we will continue to work hard on that.

Violence against Women and Girls: Reform of the Criminal Justice System

12. **Dame Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reform the criminal justice system to help tackle violence against women and girls. [902355]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): The Government are taking a range of measures to tackle violence against women and girls. The number of convictions in rape cases has increased by two thirds in the last reporting year, but we are restless to do more at every stage of the process from Operation Soteria, linking up police and prosecutors, through to the current national roll-out of pre-recorded evidence in all Crown courts in England and Wales.

Dame Angela Eagle: Rape Crisis statistics show that only 3% of cases saw charges brought last year, CPS figures show that only 1.3% of reported rapes are charged or summonsed, and there was a 21% increase in rape reports from the previous year, so what on earth is the Secretary of State going to do to reverse these serial failures and to deal with this epidemic of rape, which on his watch is going unpunished?

Dominic Raab: I can reassure the hon. Lady, first, that police referrals and the number of suspects charged have gone up over the last year, and Crown court receipts of those actually arriving in court are going up, but she is right to be restless to do more. We have rolled out national and local data dashboards for crime, but also specifically for rape, to provide greater transparency and to spread better practice in how we secure those vital convictions. As I have already mentioned, we have quadrupled victim funding support since 2010. We have expanded so-called section 28 pre-recorded cross-examination, which is now in place for sexual and modern slavery offences in all Crown courts in England and Wales. I think Operation Soteria is probably the single biggest thing, as we get to a national roll-out next year, because it will get prosecutors and police working more collaboratively together, but also get the focus not on grilling and interrogating the complainant—the victim—but on making sure the balance does not shift and that the focus is predominantly on the suspect.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The Opposition are wrong in their characterisation and narrative of this issue, and the Justice Secretary and his colleagues across the Home Office are to be commended for the leadership that they have shown in driving up rape prosecutions across the whole system, holding independent partners to account. Will the Justice Secretary update the House on how the data are trending in the latest reports? What is he doing to hold the independent court system to account to tackle backlogs in the system, so that rape prosecutions do not have to wait longer than they should to see their day in court?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend and pay tribute to her for the incredible work she did at the Home Office. She was involved in the meetings on this, and I know how committed she was and how much impact she had. On the results—those are what female victims of crime and the whole country want to see—between April and June 2022, police referrals were up by 95% from the 2019 figure. The number of suspects charged was up by 65% compared with 2019 figures, and Crown court receipts were up 91% from 2019 figures. There is much more to do, but that shows the trajectory and progress, and all the hard work that my hon. Friend and others have done.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Ellie Reeves.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Responsibility for ending violence against women and girls is a key role of Government, yet we have a Justice Secretary who could not get the definition of misogyny right, who is accused of bullying, and who is desperate to scrap the Human Rights Act—law that has helped to protect women against male violence. When domestic violence is up and rape charges are at 1.5%, does that send a message that tackling violence against women and girls is not a priority for the Justice Secretary?

Dominic Raab: Amid all the bluster and political point scoring, the hon. Lady is losing the opportunity to pay tribute to the important work being done across the justice system, which will give female victims confidence to come forward. That is what we need to see: improvements in police referrals and in the number of suspects charged, improvements in Crown court receipts, and the ability for victims to opt for pre-recorded evidence, so that they go through what must be a harrowing experience without being in the glare of the courtroom. Those are all positive steps. We are restless to do more, but we have made progress, and I do not think it helps to instil or improve confidence in the justice system if inaccurate characterisations of the progress we have made are asserted in this place.

Imprisonment Rates

14. **Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): What recent estimate he has made of imprisonment rates. [902357]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): The Ministry of Justice publishes information on the number of people sentenced to immediate custody, along with other sentencing outcomes, in the criminal justice system statistics publication. The latest publication is for the year ending June 2022. The custody rate was 6.6% in the year ending June 2022 for all offences, 33%

for indictable offences, and 1.1% for summary only offences. Although sentencing is entirely a matter for our independent courts, it is right that those who commit serious crimes should expect to receive a custodial sentence. This Government have ensured that courts have the powers they need.

Liz Saville Roberts: These data are significant. Cardiff University has uncovered the fact that courts in Wales imprison more people per head of population than England, and I am sure the Minister agrees that we need to know why. That is nigh-on impossible, however, when England and Wales are treated as identical for justice, even though key services are devolved. For justice to be best served in Wales we need to know what is happening in Wales, and who is responsible for what. Will the Minister commit to publishing Wales-specific data annually from now on?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, and she tempts me a little. I appreciate the point she makes but, as she will appreciate, the English and Welsh justice systems are one justice system, and it is not a simple task to disaggregate the data depending on whether someone is sentenced to imprisonment and serves in England or in Wales. I am happy to meet her to discuss the issue, but I would not underestimate the complexity of what she asks.

Independent Review of Criminal Legal Aid

16. **Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Whether he has made an assessment of the effectiveness of the steps taken by his Department to implement the recommendations of the independent review of criminal legal aid. [R] [902359]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): In March we consulted on our approach to recommendations made by the independent review of criminal legal aid, and we published our interim response in July. We have introduced a 15% uplift across most free schemes, in line with the recommendations. That means an additional annual benefit of up to £63 million for solicitor firms, and up to £39 million for criminal barristers in a steady state situation. Uplifts for solicitors and barristers have already started being paid, and we have also applied fee uplifts to the vast majority of existing Crown court cases, to address concerns that the uplifted fees did not apply to ongoing work.

Karl Turner: Well before the Criminal Bar Association took action to strike, I warned the Lord Chancellor that that was inevitable unless he sat down with the association and worked constructively. He accused me of being its shop steward. Now, criminal defence solicitors' firms are on their knees. The Justice Secretary is not known for working constructively, but will he sit down with the Law Society and representative groups of criminal solicitors to come to an agreement on parity of funding between the criminal Bar and criminal defence solicitors?

Mike Freer: My right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor meets all stakeholders on a regular basis, and I think he has a meeting coming up to address those very concerns. I am sure that he will sit down and discuss those concerns in the next few weeks.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The Lord Chancellor's successor and predecessor was able to achieve more in a few days than the current Justice Secretary ever has by agreeing a deal and ending the CBA's strike action. The Law Society has warned that it may be forced to advise its members to stop working in criminal practice if Bellamy's recommendations are not met. Will the Lord Chancellor get his priorities straight and honour the Government's own review by giving legal aid solicitors the funding they need to avoid collapse and make our justice system sustainable?

Mike Freer: I know that the Lord Chancellor—he is his own predecessor, as was pointed out—has been committed to ensuring that the system remains correctly funded within the spending envelope. He will continue to address the concerns raised by all stakeholders in the criminal justice system. We are entirely committed to working with the advisory board to address all the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised.

Criminal Justice System: Racial Disparity

17. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help tackle racial disparity in the criminal justice system. [902360]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): In response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, the Government's inclusive Britain strategy sets out a clear commitment to tackling race and ethnic disparities in the criminal justice system. We are reducing the number of individuals from ethnic minorities entering the criminal justice system by expanding the use of diversionary initiatives such as out-of-court disposals to divert towards treatment or drug education courses. For those in contact with the system, we are providing funding for grassroots ethnic minority-led and specialist voluntary sector organisations to provide rehabilitative services.

Mr Dhesi: The disproportionate representation of black children in our justice system starts with arrests, with black children over four times more likely to be arrested than white children as of 2019. We must address the deep-rooted causes of that, ensuring that those from ethnic minority backgrounds are not discriminated against and drawn into a cycle of criminality due to a bias in our criminal justice system. The Lammy review exposed that bias and discrimination more than half a decade ago, so why have the Government still not implemented its recommendations in full?

Mike Freer: We have implemented the majority of the actions that we committed to in response to the Lammy review. The hon. Gentleman raises important points regarding the over-representation of ethnic minority children in the system. There is a range of activities, including work that we are doing in two test areas, to ensure that those people who are arrested have access to and can only opt out of legal representation, to try to ensure that the issues that he raised are addressed. I am happy to meet him to go through those activities and discuss them in much more detail.

Establishment of a Royal Commission on Prisons

18. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): If he will establish a royal commission on prisons and the wider criminal justice system. [902361]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): The hon. Gentleman will know of our commitment. Following the pandemic, it is also right that we prioritise recovery in the criminal justice system.

Grahame Morris: Notwithstanding that answer, which I thank the Minister for, a little earlier the Justice Secretary referred to manifesto commitments, and I remind the House that the Conservatives made a manifesto commitment to establishing a royal commission on criminal justice, but that is looking like a pretty slim commitment. Prisons in particular are at the heart of our criminal justice system, and they are in crisis, plagued by violence, drugs, squalor and a shameful lack of meaningful rehabilitation activity. Does the Minister accept that the priority must be a full public inquiry with statutory powers to find out what has gone wrong?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is of course right about the commitment, and I referred to it in my opening response. It is true that the coronavirus changed many things, including causing significant issues in the criminal justice system and in prisons. We have published the prisons White Paper, which sets out a strategy for further improvement in all aspects of the secure estate, and I am pleased to be able to report significant progress on matters such as employment, which we know is important to reducing reoffending, and accommodation, with a five percentage points reduction in the number of individuals leaving prison who are homeless or rough sleeping.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry we did not get to the end of questions, but people were a little indulgent in the time taken.

Topical Questions

T1. [902366] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): Since my last Justice questions, we have begun construction of Britain's first all-electric prison at Full Sutton and made apprenticeships available to prisoners for the first time. We are preparing to bring the Bill of Rights Bill back to this House for its Second Reading, so that we can strengthen free speech, deport more foreign national offenders and restore some common sense to our justice system.

Mr Robertson: To help the rehabilitation of offenders and to reduce reoffending, will my right hon. Friend support the scheme being promoted by Gloucestershire's police and crime commissioner, Chris Nelson, to involve prisoners in the construction of eco-pods, providing much-needed environmentally friendly accommodation as well as valuable construction skills and work experience for prisoners?

Dominic Raab: It is a cracking scheme that tackles two of the key issues we need to tackle: homelessness on release, and getting offenders into work. Following the successful proof of concept at HMP Leyhill, the scheme is now operational at HMP The Mount, and we plan to expand the activity to more prisons across the estate. It is good for offenders to grasp a second chance to turn their lives around, but critical to reducing reoffending and keeping our streets safe.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State back to his place on the Treasury Bench. This Friday is International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, but too often the news headlines are dominated by horrific crimes against women such as Sarah Everard, Sabina Nessa, and now Zara Aleena. How far have rape prosecutions fallen since the action plan on rape was launched in 2015?

Dominic Raab: Because of the backlog and some of the challenges we have faced, there have been difficulties. I have set out before the House some of the initiatives, from Operation Soteria to the national roll-out of section 28 pre-recorded evidence. As I mentioned earlier, over the last year, convictions have increased by two thirds, and the trajectories of police referral, CPS charge and Crown court receipt level have all seen a substantial improvement, but we are restless to go even further.

Steve Reed: Let me remind the right hon. Gentleman that the number of prosecutions has halved in that time, and today barely one in 100 reported rapes ever makes it to trial. As we just heard, he keeps trying, but there really can be no excuse for a failure to prosecute rapists. Will he take the opportunity of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women to apologise to rape survivors for his Government's decision to sack 22,000 police officers, close 160 courts and slash the number of judges, when they should have been focused on caging these dangerous criminals?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman and I get on very constructively, but I have to tell him that we are not going to take lectures on standing up for victims from a party whose Members voted in this House against the recruitment of police and against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which increased sentences, and a party that provided a quarter of the funding for victims that we have provided.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I remind the Front Benchers that topical questions are about getting other Members in? It is their time, not the Front Benchers'.

T3. [902368] **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): There are long waiting lists for the Crown court in Essex, and I am told that that is in part due to a shortage of judges. What progress is being made to shorten the waiting lists and appoint judges in Essex?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): We are working hard to ensure that we recruit over 1,000 new judges. We are allowing 80 circuit judges and 125 fee-paid recorders to sit for more days to ensure we increase capacity. We are boosting circuit judge recruitment, with about 90 new appointments, who will sit in London and the south-east, including Essex, to address the issues my right hon. Friend raised.

T2. [902367] **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): The miners strike of 1984-85 was hugely traumatic in my Midlothian constituency and other coalfield communities. Although the future is bright, many people still need closure. Will the Secretary of State follow the Scottish Government's lead and pardon convictions from that period, and launch the UK-wide inquiry necessary to finally close this episode?

Dominic Raab: I understand the passion with which the hon. Gentleman spoke. We do not have current plans to do so, but if he wants to write to me on that issue I will, of course, look at it and reflect.

T5. [902370] **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): There are direct links between education and reducing reoffending. Education is a factor in promoting reintegration and rehabilitation. While there is rightly a focus in prison on education for employment, too many prisoners have very poor literacy skills, which impacts their ability to access education. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to improve literacy in the prison population?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): My hon. Friend is dead right: literacy is fundamental, including, of course, to access those other parts of education. I welcome the work of organisations such as the Shannon Trust and I welcome the recent Ofsted report. We are sharpening our focus, creating a literacy innovation fund.

T4. [902369] **Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Two weeks ago, an inquest into the death of my constituent's brother, Liridon Saliuka, found that significant and multiple failings at Belmarsh had contributed to his death while on remand there. I recognise that Ministers will not immediately know the details of what happened, but I believe my constituent is entitled to understand how her brother could have been so comprehensively let down. Will the Secretary of State find out what went wrong and, in the first instance, write to me?

Dominic Raab: These kinds of cases are harrowing for the family. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me with further details, I will be very happy to look at them and report back to him.

T8. [902373] **Katherine Fletcher** (South Ribble) (Con): The Minister will be aware that I have raised a series of concerns with a number of Ministers and Secretaries of State about the proposals to put a third prison in the small Chorley borough village of Ulnes Walton. There is not sufficient road infrastructure to support it, there is no public transport solution, the local council objects to it, the councillors objected to it, and a survey I put out to local residents was overwhelmingly against it. Please can he commit today to withdrawing the planning inspector appeal and look again at the plans?

Damian Hinds: The estate expansion programme is important and fulfils a manifesto commitment. I absolutely acknowledge that my hon. Friend is a very strong campaigner. I hope she will also appreciate that a planning appeal is ongoing and, in those circumstances, it is not appropriate for me to comment further.

T6. [902371] **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): Imprisonment for public protection—IPP—sentences are a stain on the criminal justice system, but the Justice Committee's recent report offers a way forward. Will the Minister take the opportunity to act on the report's key recommendation of a mass re-sentencing exercise, or will he allow the hopelessness, despair and even suicide among IPP prisoners to shamefully continue?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question, which she puts with typical passion and care. My noble Friend Lord Bellamy and I are carefully considering the Justice Committee report and will respond to it in due course.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): My Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022 comes into force in February. Will the Minister confirm that cross-departmental work with the relevant Departments is taking place, so that from day one teachers, social workers, police, Border Force officers and others will have had the right training and know exactly what to do when faced with a case of child marriage?

Mike Freer: First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work on pursuing this important issue. As she said, the law will come into effect in February 2023. I can confirm that cross-departmental work has been taking place to ensure that officials across Government, the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council are as up to date as possible. The Home Office has been updating its forced marriage guidance, which provides detailed advice to groups such as Border Force officers, social workers, police and teachers on what to do when faced with a case of forced child marriage. I hope that in swift order the work she has been so passionate about is enforced.

T7. [902372] **Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): In 2010, there were 1,861 firms of criminal solicitors with duty contracts; there are now 964. The profession of criminal defence solicitor is broken and so is the justice system. Who does the Lord Chancellor think broke the system? [R]

Mike Freer: I do not accept the hon. Member's characterisation. The Government have invested—

Karl Turner: Those are numbers and facts.

Mike Freer: The Government have invested significantly in the criminal justice system, not just through the recent settlement with the Criminal Bar Association, but in the run-up to the settlement. There is continued investment in the criminal justice system. He may disagree, but those are other facts.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Although I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to increasing rape charging rates and the positive news regarding rape convictions, the facts suggest that what is happening is somewhat to the contrary. In the year ending March 2022, the police recorded the highest annual number of rape offences to date—70,330—but charges were brought in only 2,223 cases. With the split in responsibility between the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice,

what steps can my right hon. Friend take, working with his Home Office colleagues, to make sure that more people are charged and put before the courts?

Dominic Raab: I thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all his work on this issue and the considerable experience that he brings to bear. I read out the statistics and there is clearly more work to be done, but, actually, the trajectory of the latest figures is going in a better direction. The decision making on CPS charging is independent, but it is critical that we proceed with the national roll-out of Operation Soteria, because it is proving to be a very effective tool in getting the police and the CPS to work together more collaboratively to bring forward cases that can go to court.

T9. [902374] **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is exactly four months ago today that the Government published their response to the consultation on reform of the law on strategic lawsuits against public participation. Recently, the Joint Committee on Human Rights heard that a journalist who wants to defend themselves against one of those malicious attacks might need backing of £1 million before they can do so in court. How much longer will it be before the necessary legislation is brought to Parliament?

Dominic Raab: I totally share the hon. Gentleman's commitment and it is good to be able to address the issue on a cross-party basis. Earlier this year, we ran a call for evidence on SLAPPs reform. I brought that together at very short notice and the Department did an incredible job in providing specific proposals. Our proposals include a new statutory definition, an early dismissal process to strike out SLAPPs claims without merit, and cost protection for defendants in cases. I intend to introduce legislative proposals as soon as possible.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): One issue with family court delays is that lawyers will advise their clients to get a court application in early. That is not the lawyers' fault; they have to do the best for their clients and they know that delay is not in the best interests of the child. However, once a court application is in, parents go into a defensive crouch. Some parents refuse to negotiate until the first hearing and separated parents information programmes do not kick in until the court hearing has happened. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that Ministers in this House and in the other place are working together for family law reform to reduce court delays?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank her for her continued campaigning on this issue. It is worth saying, first, that around 45% of the private family law case backlog is non-safeguarding, non-domestic abuse cases. It is important that those other cases go to court. In relation to the others, we are using mediation and the roll-out and promotion of a voucher scheme to support mediation. Where a reasonable solution has been the outcome of mediation, it is also important that we use cost shifting in the courts, so people cannot just double-dip or go from one to the other. If we do that, we will have the right balance between carrot and stick and, certainly, far better outcomes for children.

T10. [902375] **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): An official staff network within HM Prison and Probation Service has circulated an email to all staff, advising them that use of the phrases "protecting women and girls" and "same-sex attraction" is transphobic. That email came from a Ministry of Justice address and was marked "Official". Does the Minister agree that that advice risks creating a hostile environment for female staff and for lesbian, gay and bisexual staff? Will he distance the Ministry of Justice from it?

Damian Hinds: I can reassure the hon. and learned Lady that the email she speaks of was not an official Ministry of Justice or HM Prison and Probation Service email; it was from a network of staff. It does not constitute official advice. The Department is looking again at how internal communications are done. Most importantly, she will be aware of the Deputy Prime Minister's move to ensure that in future the default assumption is that if you are a transgender woman with intact male genitalia, you will not be placed in the female estate. That is an important part of the reform package.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Last June, six-year-old Charlotte-Sky was killed as she was walking along the pavement near her home in Norton Green. Her killer, John Owen, had been drinking, was on drugs, was speeding, was not wearing a seatbelt and was on his mobile phone. He got an insulting six years and four months in prison. Will the Lord Chancellor meet Charlotte's mother Claire and me to urgently discuss sentencing guidelines, to ensure that justice is truly served next time?

Dominic Raab: May I express my condolences and deep sorrow to the family of my hon. Friend's young constituent? He will know that we have increased the sentencing for driving offences, but I am happy to look at the matter again with him and meet his constituents.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): A constituent who is a rape survivor told me in tears how her phone was taken off her. I have talked to Metropolitan police officers who say that that was because the courts have stipulated it. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that phones are not taken off rape survivors? They say that it compounds the abuse they feel. Evidence could be taken very quickly and returned to them. My constituent could not afford to buy another one.

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about this issue, which is one of the eight levers that we are pressing down on to improve outcomes and give victims the confidence to come forward. A new scheme is in place in relation to digitisation, which is being rolled out and increased across England and Wales. There is also the possibility of swapping, but the key thing is that a victim who comes forward gets their phone back quick sharp—within 24 hours—in order to prevent that sense of dislocation, which can only add insult to injury. If the hon. Lady writes to me about it, I will give her chapter and verse, because it is such an important issue.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): In 2018, HM Inspectorate of Prisons issued an urgent notification document setting out serious failings at HM Prison Exeter. Last week, the inspectorate, for the first time ever, issued a second consecutive notification about the same prison. I am grateful to the Minister of State for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of it, but will he look urgently at why the failings were not picked up in the four years in between?

Damian Hinds: I will indeed. I take this extremely seriously, as my hon. Friend knows. This is the first time that we have had two consecutive urgent notifications about the same prison. The Department will come forward with a full action plan within 28 days. As he rightly says, this is a very serious matter.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): My constituents Mr and Mrs Amner sustained horrific, life-changing injuries when their motorbike was hit by a car driver under the influence of drugs overtaking a van. They are understandably extremely distressed that while they will live with the consequences of that accident for the rest of their lives, the perpetrator was sentenced to just 30 months. As the Secretary of State will know, although there has been a recent consultation on sentencing, the guideline sentence cannot be raised above five years without primary legislation. Has he any plans for a Government Bill with a clause to raise the maximum sentence for drink and drug driving?

Dominic Raab: We have relatively recently increased the sentences in relation to driving offences, but if the hon. Lady writes to me again about this harrowing case, I will look at it very carefully and write back to her with the detail.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I have a constituent who is a victim of grooming. She has been sexually abused and assaulted. The trial of the defendant keeps being pushed back, which naturally is causing a great deal of distress. We know that there are delays in the criminal courts, some of which have been exacerbated by industrial action, but can the Justice Secretary tell me how such cases will be prioritised so that justice can be served for the victims and the perpetrators can be locked away with good, strong sentences?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend and I worked together closely to increase sentences for the most serious crimes, and she is right about the impact of the Criminal Bar Association's strike action on the backlog. I can reassure her that under the spending review settlement—something I will be keen to protect as far as I can, given the autumn statement—an extra £447 million will be going into the criminal justice system to help improve waiting times. On top of that, we are recruiting up to 1,000 judges in 2022-23 and we have removed the limit on sitting days in a Crown court for the second year in a row, precisely to get the wheels of justice turning more quickly and to give her constituents the justice they need.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): The surgeon who caused life-changing injuries by inserting surgical mesh into my constituent Carol recently acted as an expert witness in an unrelated surgical mesh negligence case. The judge was highly critical of his evidence and accused him of cherry-picking parts of the evidence that were supportive of the defendant's case. Will the Justice Secretary meet me and the victims of surgical mesh to hear directly from them how such conflicts of interest are proving to be a barrier to justice?

Dominic Raab: If the hon. Lady writes to me with the details of that case, I will certainly ensure that she has a meeting with the most appropriate Minister.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): By their very nature, family court cases are sensitive, delicate and complex, but all are urgent. During the time for such cases to be heard, will the courts provide assistance for families who are having difficult times to get them through the process?

Dominic Raab: Yes, and if the hon. Member writes to me with the details of his concerns, I would be happy to address them in more detail, on top of the assurances I have already provided to the House about the approach we are taking forward.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): My constituent Lisa Brown has been missing, presumed murdered, in Spain since 2015, yet this morning I heard from Lisa's family that the prime suspect, who was imprisoned in Liverpool in 2020 for 12 years for drug offences and gun-running, has absconded. Can I ask the Secretary of State or their prisons Minister to assure me, Lisa's family and the House that their Department is doing all it can to return this dangerous criminal to prison, where they rightfully belong?

Dominic Raab: Certainly I can give the hon. Gentleman and his constituents that assurance. Absconds are actually very rare now; they have fallen by nearly two thirds over the last decade, from 235 in 2010-11 to 95 in 2021-22. The majority are captured quickly, but he will want to know that that happens in this case and I will ensure that his concerns are passed on.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Bill of Rights Bill strengthens the power of the state by weakening the ability of victims to enforce their European convention rights. Does the Secretary of State think that it is appropriate for him to be piloting this legislation when he is himself under investigation for the abuse of power and may not be in Government to complete the passage of this controversial constitutional change, for which he appears to be the only advocate?

Dominic Raab: Yes.

Solihull Murders

12.37 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary or Ministers to make a statement on the Solihull murders.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): Let me begin by saying that my thoughts are with the loved ones of Raneem Oudeh and Khaola Saleem. For a mother and daughter to lose their lives in this way is truly heartbreaking. It is of course the perpetrator who bears the ultimate responsibility for this sickening act. Equally, when something like this occurs, it is right that all the circumstances are thoroughly examined. That has taken place in this case, including through an inquest and an investigation by the Independent Office for Police Conduct.

The failings and missed opportunities that have been identified are clearly unacceptable. I note that West Midlands Police has apologised to the family of the victims. The force has said that a number of changes have been made since then, including increasing the number of staff specifically investigating domestic abuse offences and the creation of a new team to review investigations. None of this can undo what has happened; nor can it take away the grief and devastation that this horrific crime has caused. What can and must happen is for every possible step to be taken to prevent further tragedies. We expect all necessary improvements to be made in full and at pace.

As a former practising barrister, I want to see massive change in this space. We need action, and we need to continue the action we have started. Cracking down on crime is a key priority for me, for the Home Secretary and for the Government as a whole. That includes the wide-ranging action we are taking to address violence against women and girls and domestic abuse through the tackling domestic abuse plan and the tackling violence against women and girls strategy. The police are central to this mission, and we will continue to recruit further police officers. We have committed to 20,000 new officers, of which we now have more than 15,000, but there is more to do.

I will finish where I started, by saying that my thoughts are with the loved ones of Ms Oudeh and Ms Saleem. We owe it to them to do everything in our power to prevent others from having to suffer what they had to suffer.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jess Phillips: I welcome the new Minister; it will be a pleasure to stand opposite her at the Dispatch Box.

Last week, an inquest into the deaths of Khaola Saleem and her daughter, Raneem Oudeh, concluded with a verdict of unlawful killing. The inquest laid out all the ways in which the two women were failed by the police, culminating in the catastrophic and heartbreaking failure to respond to 999 calls on the night of their murders. The police failed to respond to domestic abuse reported by Raneem. They failed adequately to respond to reports from paramedics and neighbours. They failed to record and investigate the crimes. They failed to make an arrest. They failed to safeguard the two women.

They failed adequately to train their officers. They downgraded Raneem's risk, and these two women were killed.

Since this case in 2018, far from improving, the number of domestic abuse incidents has risen and the number of prosecutions has fallen. This is not merely an historical case. Today, and every day, women will call the police and no one will come. The Minister has just said that she wishes to do everything in her power. Will her Government, as they have done with burglary, commit to every single domestic abuse incident receiving a police response? What will she do to monitor that?

Why was this man not being properly monitored or managed in the community? This is the case with thousands of other violent perpetrators. We are currently not managing and monitoring even the worst repeat offenders of this crime. Why not?

Following last week's autumn statement, the Home Office will have £1 billion less to spend over three years, including on policing and domestic abuse. The Independent Office for Police Conduct highlighted that police resourcing issues were part of the problem in this case. Given the failings exposed, and given the squeezing of police budgets, how will the Minister guarantee that the service will not decline? How will the Government ensure that the police are held accountable for their inaction?

The so-called Bill of Rights poses a threat to the article 2 inquest process that helped to expose the failings in this case. Do the Government wish that these failings had remained in the shadows, unknown, to allow the deaths of further women? Will they commit to oversight mechanisms to look at police failings in relation to femicide?

In the words of Nour Norris, Khaola's sister:

"The inquest has revealed the full horror of police failings, but there is so much more yet to achieve".

Miss Dines: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her work and her commitment on this issue, and I will continue in that vein. This case is tragic, and we have to work together to make sure we have as few similar cases as possible. I do not want to see another case, as one more death is one too many.

The IOPC undertook an extensive report and made recommendations. I have looked at it, and some of that work is already being implemented, but it is not enough. We need work at ground level, and we need better policing. Each police and crime commissioner has significant funding to make a real difference. It is about local police and crime commissioners working with police officers to implement better training.

I remind the House of the extensive £695.6 million funding settlement received by West Midlands Police. There are sufficient funds, properly managed by the local police and crime commissioner, to ensure that this does not happen again. I agree that every domestic abuse incident needs to be properly looked at by the police. We need thorough risk assessments, and they need to be followed with proper training. This Government are implementing the most significant investment in training in this area, and I look forward to further increases, with West Midlands and all other police forces taking on board the plans this Government are undertaking.

Before I sit down, I should also say that tackling perpetrators of domestic abuse is an absolute priority for this Government and for me. That is why in the tackling abuse plan we set out a strategy for pursuing those who cause these harms—more knowledge, more intelligence and more training. With this plan, we have committed £75 million for work with perpetrators, including continuing to build on our previous investment in perpetrator interventions, and we are looking to ensure that the police have all the tools they need to identify the most violent and dangerous perpetrators. Domestic abuse, which leads to death in many cases, often caused by a family member or former partner, has to be tackled, and I am committed to doing that.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I have met Khaola and Raneem's family, and seen at first hand their quiet dignity, clear love for one another and desire to see something good come from their loss. When I visited in the aftermath of the murders, the family raised concerns with me about policing resources in Solihull. In recent years, the police and crime commissioner has systematically removed police officers from Solihull to other parts of the west midlands, despite Solihull paying more than its fair share through the precept. In addition, the previous PCC even threatened to close the main police station in the town centre. We owe it to all victims of crime to ensure that Solihull gets its fair share, and the Labour PCC should announce forthwith that Solihull will get a new police station, and quickly.

Miss Dines: I am impressed by my hon. Friend's commitment to his community and to this cause. I would like the local PCC to look carefully at how he spends his money. We need to look carefully at prioritising the most serious worries, which are threats to life and threats to property. There can be no greater threat to life than that illustrated by these tragic deaths.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I commend my own local force and the chief constable for leading good work in Avon and Somerset. As the Minister is talking about policing, will she tell us how many forces are still not providing domestic abuse training to officers? The figure was recently nine, but has that gone up or down?

Miss Dines: I understand that more than two thirds of forces have implemented the new training. Frankly, that is not good enough, and I know that the Home Secretary is keen to work with me in this area. I wish to remind the House that for the first time we have a national policing lead for tackling violence against women and girls—deputy chief constable Maggie Blyth. Curiously enough, I was supposed to be meeting her at this very moment. I will reschedule that meeting as a matter of priority. The Government are giving the extra investment, with £3.3 million to expand domestic abuse training for police, and we need to make sure that that is implemented in each and every force.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): The facts of this case beggar belief. Ten separate complaints were made to the police about incidents of domestic violence, and four calls were made on the night. I have read the IOPC report carefully, and it finds there was a failure to carry out sufficient intelligence checks, a failure to record and a failure to make the right recommendations. Ultimately, however, the outcome it recommends is increased training.

Will the Home Office consider something like the criminal justice scorecards that it is pioneering in areas such as rape, to show the performance of individual police forces, so that members of the public can have faith in their local force?

Miss Dines: I am interested in those ideas and I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that. Training is the key. This case was heartbreaking. How many of us listened to the press meeting on Friday last week and to the tragedy of this? It simply did not need to happen. The police need to be better trained. That comes from the top, not only from Government but from the local PCC. We do need proper training in place. When a person—invariably it is a woman—says that they are in fear of losing their life and even says that somebody might be coming round with a knife, as happened in this case, the police need to take it seriously.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I would like to send my condolences to the family and loved ones of Raneem and Khaola. A report from Refuge last year identified that black women are less likely to be referred to a refuge by the police. On the night of her death, one of the victims made her 10th call to the police. Can the Minister explain why the response to black women is so inadequate? Is cultural sensitivity included in domestic abuse training?

Miss Dines: Training does include those issues. It is about time that people who work in this field do not look towards colour as being an excuse for non-activity. This Government take the matter very seriously. It does not matter what colour, creed or sex a person is; if they need the police's help, they need the police's help. I expect those themes to be included in proper police training.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): My thoughts and prayers go out to the loved ones of Raneem and Khaola. I am backing the campaign of my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) to keep Solihull police station open. I am also campaigning to open up a front desk at Chelmsley Wood police station. Does the Minister agree that the security of our constituents has to be above party politics? The police and crime commissioner has the resources; he needs to commit to protecting our constituents.

Miss Dines: I am grateful for the question asked by my hon. Friend, who is a parliamentary and local colleague. We do need to focus on proper policing: the threat to life is just so important. I will do everything I can to ensure that this matter is not party political. I would welcome working with any Member of this House if it meant that we could stop just one death—but I want to stop them all.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The facts of this case are horrifying and heartbreaking. I echo the remarks that have been made about the need for basic policing and ask the Minister to consider mandatory training. I think that this is a reminder that domestic abuse and violence against women is still endemic in our society. What we really need is an educational approach; a public information campaign to remind us all of how bad it is and what we—every citizen, not just the police—should be looking for.

Miss Dines: The Government are doing that at the moment. The “Enough” campaign has had quite a high profile on social media, with a great deal of take-up. The work of tackling violence against women and girls is very serious. In July 2021, we published our new cross-Government programme on the tackling violence against women and girls strategy. That includes the tackling domestic abuse plan published in March 2022. As a result of that there will be specific pieces of work on education and, I hope, training within the police, but education of the population has been brought forward. I know, from discussing this with young men across the country, that they have taken up the “Enough” programme and campaigned on it really seriously. The message is hitting through, but it is just the start. I want to do more.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I associate myself and my party with what has been said. My thoughts and prayers are with Raneem, her mother and her family. The 999 calls in relation to the Solihull murders are indeed harrowing and frustrating. Raneem, 22, stated, “When I call 999, they cannot come quickly enough.” She rang 999 six times in the hours before she was killed. Does the Minister agree that the murders of Raneem and her mother were entirely preventable? Those calls should have been red-flagged. There were six 999 phone calls, but there was no answer. The police should have taken quicker action to ensure that the two victims were kept safe from the dangerous man and the abuse that he inflicted on them. We must do better. We can do better.

Miss Dines: What is worrying about this case is that there were obvious markers—not just one or two but many. I know that that is something that West Midlands police are working hard on. Nobody could fail to be moved by those 999 calls, which were on all the TV channels—the soft voice of somebody who was about to be murdered, but who was ignored. That must never happen again. The fact that a person speaks softly, calmly, or in a way that the police are not used to, should not be a barrier to listening to the words that they are saying.

Mr Speaker: That completes the urgent question.

Nuclear Test Veterans: Medals

12.54 pm

The Minister for Veterans’ Affairs (Johnny Mercer): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the significant contribution of the nuclear test veterans from across the Commonwealth who participated in Britain’s nuclear testing programme.

Seventy years ago, on 3 October 1952, the UK undertook its first nuclear test and in so doing confirmed our country’s status as the world’s third nuclear power. Critical to the success were those who took part in our nuclear testing programme. In doing so, they made a unique and unprecedented contribution to our national security. There is a direct line between the service of these men and women all those years ago and the safety and security of all nations today. In recognition of their service and to mark 70 years since the first test, the Government are undertaking a programme of recognition to mark the contributions of all service personnel and civilians who took part in the UK and, later, the US nuclear testing programmes in Australia and the Pacific.

The programme of recognition began yesterday with the UK’s first commemorative event for nuclear test veterans at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire to mark the 70th anniversary of the first UK nuclear test. Going forward, the programme will include recognition of the role of military and civilian staff from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and other Pacific islands, which were involved in the nuclear testing operations, as well as an acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the lands that were used for nuclear testing.

We will provide funds to support activities for nuclear test veterans and educate the public on their efforts. We are commissioning an oral history archive to ensure that the stories of the veterans who served are captured for future generations.

The Prime Minister yesterday announced the creation of a new medal, the nuclear test medal, which has been graciously approved by His Majesty the King. This important medal will recognise and commemorate the service to the nation by participants in the UK’s nuclear testing programme. This cohort of veterans, made up of both military and civilian participants, made a significant contribution to our enduring international security. In establishing the UK’s nuclear deterrent during the critical early years of the cold war, it is important that their service is recognised and commemorated properly, and a medal is an important part of that.

It is expected that eligibility for this medal will be announced in the early part of 2023, at which time related eligibility guidance and information about the application process will be laid before Parliament.

It was a privilege to officially commemorate for the first time our nuclear test veterans at the National Memorial Arboretum yesterday. We gathered together to say thank you to all those who were present and to the families of those whom we have already lost. This nation today still enjoys the freedoms and privileges afforded by their service, which started 70 years ago, and it is right that they have now finally received official recognition for their service.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for announcing the medals for nuclear test veterans yesterday. The energy that he uses to make this the best place in

the world in which to be a veteran should be supported across the House. Without his support, yesterday's event would simply not have been a success.

I also thank my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary whose support for this cause over many years has been noted by campaigners. I pay tribute, too, to the often unseen members of the civil service who have gone well above and beyond over the past few nights, particularly those who have worked tirelessly in the Office for Veterans' Affairs and in No.10 on this.

Primarily, I want to record from this Dispatch Box the Government's thanks to the veterans of our nuclear tests. As one veterans' campaigner to another, I would say, "I salute you. I salute your relentlessness, your courage and your determination. Your legacy is long and impressive." I also wish to pay tribute to the families, friends and supporters of nuclear test veterans from all sides over the past 70 years. Their support to these men and women has been steadfast—from those who work in the media to those, from all parties, who have campaigned for so long in Parliament itself, such as the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

I salute the campaigners and I thank them, as we are now finally delivering on the long-overdue medallic recognition of our nuclear test veterans. A medal does not signify the end of that recognition; it signifies a new beginning of the official recognition of the nuclear test veterans' service, with the initiatives I have outlined. I look forward to working with all Members of the House in the years ahead to get that right.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Minister.

12.59 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

Yesterday's announcement was a huge victory for our nuclear test veterans and their families. Finally, those veterans will receive the long-overdue medallic recognition they so deeply deserve. When I have spoken to nuclear test veterans and their family members in meetings and at rallies, I have found their passion for justice truly inspiring.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the nuclear test veterans campaigners specifically on the tireless perseverance that made this announcement happen: LABRATS, the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association, the *Daily Mirror* and its columnist, the relentless Susie Boniface. I was privileged to join them at the National Memorial Arboretum yesterday to witness the announcement and hear their moving testimonies. The outburst of applause was followed by deep sighs of simple relief that the medals have finally been agreed to, 70 years on from the first British test of a nuclear weapon.

Our country owes nuclear test veterans from across the UK and the Commonwealth a debt of gratitude. Their service, far away from home, ensured that the UK had a nuclear deterrent as part of ensuring our security and safety. They made that commitment to our country at great personal cost. Reports state that nuclear test veterans have a legacy of cancers, blood disorders and rare disease, while their wives report three times the usual rate of miscarriage. Their children also have 10 times

the normal amount of birth defects and are five times more likely to die as infants. That was the cost of our nation's safety.

This statement is the House's opportunity to say thank you to our nuclear test veterans for their service and their deep personal sacrifices. On behalf of the Labour party, I thank the nuclear test veterans who served in Operations Hurricane, Totem, Mosaic, Buffalo, Grapple, Antler, Dominic, Kittens, Tims, Rats, Vixen, Ayres, Hercules and Brumby. Only around 1,500 of the 22,000 service personnel who took part in those trials are thought still to be alive, so I hope the nuclear test veterans' families and descendants finally feel that that historic injustice has been recognised. It is completely right that these medals can be awarded posthumously and that the veterans' dedication to our country will not be forgotten.

The Labour party has been proud to give nuclear test veterans our fullest backing. The shadow Defence team has consistently supported their campaign for justice, together with my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey). My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition was the first party leader to meet the nuclear test veterans and their families and commit his support to their campaign. To ensure this situation never happens again, we are committed to a complete review of the system for awarding medals to serving personnel and veterans. The recognition they deserve should not require people to resort to lengthy campaigns or ministerial interventions.

Will the Minister commit to ensuring that the eligibility criteria for the nuclear test veterans' medallic recognition are as wide as possible? What resources will be put into finding living descendants of nuclear test veterans to award posthumous medals? Finally, will the Minister support Labour's proposal for a root-and-branch review of the whole medals process?

Johnny Mercer: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words. She is right to pay tribute to the campaigners in this space; as politicians we come and go, but these individuals have been campaigning over many years. I met a man yesterday who started campaigning for a medal 60 years ago. I pay tribute to those campaigners for their relentlessness and their ability to keep going, and I am delighted we have been able to do something, cognisant of the fact that there is more to do.

Of course the criteria will be as wide as we can possibly make them. While this announcement is one thing, delivering it to the people for whom it means so much is where the challenge lies. There are resources going into that; we have committed £450,000, part of which is for creating an oral archive, which will require us to go around and gather experiences and work with groups such as LABRATS, the BNTVA and others to get it right.

On the honours system, the Defence Secretary has been clear that he is prepared to look at how military operations fit into the bracket of medallic recognition. We need to be careful about political interference in that, but he has made his position clear on a number of occasions. In fact, that work has started: we saw during the summer how medals were awarded outside the usual parameters for Operation Pitting. That is an ongoing discussion that we can certainly have.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I congratulate the Government and my hon. Friend the Minister on the good work he has done on this issue. The House may be aware that a number of colleagues on both sides have campaigned on this for quite a while. In 2012, I was lucky enough to lead a campaign that finally saw a Prime Minister, David Cameron at the time, acknowledge the work of the nuclear test veterans and thank them at the Dispatch Box. We also managed to secure £25 million for the aged veterans fund, which is largely there for nuclear test veterans and their descendants—we should never forget the descendants, because the nuclear test veterans often are more interested in the welfare of their descendants than in themselves. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister and ask him to ensure that the momentum is kept up. We still have a lot to do, but we have accomplished an awful lot, including this initiative from the Government.

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all his efforts. As he rightly identified, in 2012 for the first time, David Cameron, the then Prime Minister, gave official recognition of nuclear test veterans. My hon. Friend is also right about £25 million going into the aged veterans fund as a result of much of his work. I pay tribute to him for his campaigning over the years and agree that this is the beginning: a medal is a part of the recognition. I hope that this good start will bring momentum towards standing by our promises and making this the best country in the world in which to be a veteran.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the SNP spokesperson.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. This is great news for the nuclear test veterans. The recognition that they carried out operations in a dangerous theatre has been many decades in the making. I commend the tireless work of nuclear test veterans and their families, particularly Alan Owen of LABRATS, the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association and, as the Opposition spokesperson said, Susie Boniface of the *Daily Mirror*.

These veterans have had to wait decades with no reward. Tragically, with only an estimated 1,500 test veterans left, the medal has come too late for many. Why has it taken so long? While I welcome the decision, there is much more work to be done to recognise the extent of nuclear test veterans' suffering, as the Minister acknowledges. In the United States, Canada and France, test veterans have been compensated. Will the Ministry of Defence now consider a financial package of compensation for nuclear test veterans who have suffered poor health as a consequence of their exposure to ionising radiation?

Will the MOD also consider compensation for families who have suffered health complications as a result of their parents' exposure? What recognition will be given to those civilians who were involved, including those in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, such as my constituent William Caldwell, now tragically deceased, who was present during the tests? This is a great first step, but it is only a first step; I look forward to hearing what the Minister plans to do next.

Johnny Mercer: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions—they are very fair questions indeed. The one about why it has taken so long is a fair question. As time has passed since the nuclear tests, our perspective and understanding of what we ask people to do has improved, and the security that they generated for our country has come more sharply into focus. That has certainly had a role to play.

When it comes to compensation, war pensions are available, and indeed, nuclear test veterans claim them from the Ministry of Defence. When I was at the MOD in 2019, we created a clearer care pathway for individuals to come forward and make those claims, but I totally accept that there is more to do. Other countries do it differently, and we are always open, as the science becomes clearer, to making sure that we look after those people. This Prime Minister is absolutely clear that we will stand by our commitments and fulfil our manifesto commitments to our veterans not only in what we say and do from here, but in how it feels to be a veteran. That is an ongoing piece of work.

Of course, the medal is open to civilians. The specific criteria around that will be laid before Parliament early in the new year.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Sadly, some of the brave nuclear test veterans are no longer around to receive their medals, so will my hon. Friend assure me that medals will be awarded posthumously, so that families can be assured that we honour every single person who played a part in efforts to keep our world safe?

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and his constant campaigning on veterans' issues. When it comes to awarding the medal posthumously, the criteria will be laid out in 2023, as I have said, but families will be able to apply. I accept that whenever we do something such as this, it will come too late for many, and that is obviously a point of regret, but we will do everything we can to make sure that the families who have lost loved ones are able to apply and are looked after through that process.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I was with my constituent Laura and her granddad John yesterday as the Prime Minister made his announcement, and they cried with joy. I thank the Minister for his unwavering support and for everything he has done to make yesterday a reality. I also thank for their unwavering support the right hon. Members for South Holland and The Deepings and for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), and of course LABRATS, the BNTVA, Susie Boniface of the *Daily Mirror*, and nuclear testing veterans themselves.

Days such as yesterday, when politicians transcended party lines for the common good, do not happen very often, and we should celebrate them when they do, but the Minister knows that much more needs to be done. I know that he is truly supportive of the veterans, so will he undertake to ensure that the Prime Minister meets me, my constituent and other nuclear testing veterans to discuss war pension reform, financial support, the release of blood and urine records, and research and an inquiry into all that happened to those men and their families?

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her relentless campaigning on this issue. Whether I have been in or out of Government, she and I have had conversations and she has continued to campaign relentlessly on behalf of veterans. I know that they are incredibly grateful for what she has done.

The Prime Minister committed yesterday, when he saw the families, to meeting those who took part in the events. I know that he was very much moved by the events of yesterday. We are committed to getting this right going forward. I have seen the stories about medical records being destroyed and so on. I do not recognise that—again, I have looked into it—but I am always open to evidence that the hon. Lady or others may have. I am determined that we get this right. The medal is one part, but it is not everything for everybody, and I am determined that the Government get right our recognition of what the nuclear test veterans did.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I commend the Minister on his statement and thank nuclear test veterans, on my behalf and that of my constituents, for everything that they have done. The work going on in Barrow at the moment to build the next generation of nuclear deterrent stands on their very tall shoulders.

Will the Minister commit to ensuring that we never forget the sacrifice of those nuclear test veterans and the critical role they have played in keeping Britain and our NATO allies safe, and, in doing so, will he make sure that the new medal is made as widely and easily available as possible?

Johnny Mercer: There is an important piece of work alongside this—it is important that people understand that the medal is only one part of it. We have committed almost half a million pounds to recording and documenting an oral archive of the experiences of the test veterans. One thing on which I have campaigned for many years is for us to truly understand what it means to go through such things. The pain of not being recognised after serving their country was etched all over the faces of many of the people who were there yesterday, and the Prime Minister certainly noted it, as did I. Going forward, we are determined to get this right.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): This announcement is hugely welcome, and I pay tribute to everyone who has made it a reality. It has been a privilege to meet nuclear test veterans and their families on a number of occasions. I am sure that the Minister is aware of issues relating to Veterans UK compensation and war pensions. That is why I and the all-party parliamentary group on veterans have launched a survey, and I hope that, when we publish the findings, the Minister will listen to them. How many nuclear test veterans have had their applications for war pensions rejected?

Johnny Mercer: I do not have that data, but I am happy to write to the hon. Lady. When it comes to Veterans UK, my position does not change whether I am inside or outside the tent. There are good people there who work hard but have been underinvested in over the years by Governments of all colours, to the point that, two years ago, they were still working from paper records. Clearly, they will not get optimal results

for veterans in that manner. This Government have committed £25 million towards digitising that whole space.¹

There are still too many people whose experiences of Veterans UK are bad. I am committed, as is the Defence Secretary, to working out why that is. It is a massively important part of getting right our veterans care in this country because lots of people deal with Veterans UK every day. We want them to feel that we are actually making this the best country in the world for veterans, and I accept that we have work to do in that space.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): Yesterday was a very good day, so may I thank the Minister, the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary, as well as all the Members thanked by the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) and my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron)? May I add to the names they listed my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones), who has been campaigning on the matter since before she was elected?

I thank them all on behalf of Mr Christopher Jefferies, a constituent of mine who wrote to me earlier this year. He said:

I...served in the Royal Air Force between 1955-60. Between 1957-58 I did two tours of duty on Christmas Island as a member of 49 squadron, the squadron tasked with testing Britain's first hydrogen bomb. Although I was not affected by radiation very many of my colleagues were. For the last 60 years we have been fighting for some recognition of our services, by way of a campaign medal".

I am so pleased that we have finally delivered for Mr Jefferies. Will the Minister take this opportunity to pay tribute to him and his colleagues for all the work that they did?

Johnny Mercer: I pay huge tribute to Christopher Jefferies and all the veterans and civilians who, at that time, when the science was very unclear about the long-term effects of the tests, went through that experience for the greater good to provide a blanket of security that all nations enjoy today and that continues to be the backbone of our defence. Of course, I pay tribute to them not only for what they did at the time but, as I have said before, for their campaigning. Relentless campaigning is hard—particularly in this place—but people such as Mr Jefferies have been going at it for a long time, and I am delighted that they have finally got the recognition they deserve.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I join right hon. and hon. colleagues on both sides of the House in paying tribute to nuclear test veterans, to the *Daily Mirror* for its campaign, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), who has been tireless in her campaigning.

Reports suggest that the Government's own long-term study shows that nuclear test veterans were almost four times more likely to die from radiogenic cancer than any other servicemen. What plans does the Minister have to study the impact of nuclear test veterans' service on their health and that of their families?

Johnny Mercer: There have been four longitudinal studies on that over the years, and the truth is that the science is not as clear as we would like. If the science were clear, it would have been easier to resolve this a long time ago. But it is not a closed book—the last

1. [Official Report, 12 January 2023, Vol. 725, c. 10MC.]

[Johnny Mercer]

study was only three years ago—and we will continue to look at it. Anyone who thinks they have been affected must go to Veterans UK and apply for a war pension—there are accelerated pathways for nuclear test veterans to get into Veterans UK. I would be delighted to help the hon. Lady with any individual cases.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I wrote to the Prime Minister on behalf of the advisory military sub-committee and those who participated in the UK's nuclear testing to ask that nuclear test veterans receive medals in recognition of their dedication and service, so today's news is very welcome. I am also pleased that the Minister has confirmed that relatives will be able to apply so that their loved ones receive the nuclear test medals posthumously. Will he come to Ynys Môn to meet some of those families and veterans and to extend his personal thanks?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend for her campaigning over the years. I would love to come to Ynys Môn. I know of a lot of her work up there in terms of the armed forces breakfast clubs and things like that, and I would love to come and support her in what she is doing. I am delighted that relatives can now apply for medallic recognition. It is an extremely important part of service in this country, and I would be delighted to come and meet some test veterans up in her patch when I can.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): May I join the universal welcome across the House for this statement, and I thank the Minister for his work? I also congratulate my constituent, Alan Owen, the founder of LABRATS, and all the other campaigners who have fought tirelessly on this campaign. The Minister has mentioned in his statement and in answering many questions that this is the start of the recognition. Can I therefore echo one of the points made by the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), who mentioned the need to release the medical records of the former nuclear test veterans, as that would be a clear indication that the Government value their contribution?

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely. The Government and I are clear that there is no sort of deliberate blocking of anything like that. We all have to accept that the science is not straightforward—if it was, this would have been resolved some time ago. Also, different peer countries do it differently for different reasons. We are always open to those conversations. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. It is the start of proper recognition for these people, and I hope, as he sees the work we undertake going forward, he will feel we are doing a good job on that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I first thank the Minister? It has been a long campaign, and the Minister has delivered, and we thank him for that, and the Prime Minister, too. I am thrilled to learn of the awarding of the medals for the veterans of Britain's nuclear testing on the plutonium anniversary. This is a true commemoration of the service and contribution of our brilliant veterans and service personnel. Does the Minister agree that the recognition of all veterans in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Kiribati under UK command should be noted for their enduring service to our great nation. For those who have died, can the Minister confirm that the families left will be in receipt of their loved ones' medals and that any financial compensation will also be available for them?

Johnny Mercer: We were the last of those nations to provide some sort of medallic recognition. New Zealand has a commemorative coin. It is similar in the United States, and Australia has a similar programme. We are speaking to all those nations all the time. We are also aware that these tests were carried out in indigenous lands in Australia. Indeed, the UK contributed £20 million to clear up these tests at the time. There is an ongoing discussion to be had in that place about how we properly recognise the commitment of indigenous people to this issue and the security that ultimately we all enjoy every day in this place. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. When it comes to compensation, there is a war pension available, and for any veteran who feels they are owed that war pension there are clear pathways into Veterans UK. If that is not the case, if he writes to me, I would be delighted to look at it.

Disposable Barbecues

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

1.23 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the use of disposable barbecues on open moorland, on beaches, in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and in certain other areas designated for environmental protection; to give local authorities the power to prohibit the sale of disposable barbecues in their area; and for connected purposes.

This year has seen us reach unprecedented temperatures in the UK. Those rising temperatures, combined with the droughts we saw this summer, turned the UK into a tinderbox. We have previously operated as a cold country, but while we are working hard to limit the extent of climate change, we need to recognise that these conditions are likely to become more regular. This year saw more than 700 wildfires burning 70 square miles of some of our most vulnerable and precious habitats—for what? The right to scald a sausage anywhere of your choosing regardless of the risks. We need to adjust our approach to hot weather, and one of the products that causes some of the biggest issues to local communities is disposable barbecues.

This Bill does not propose to ban the Great British barbecue. Instead, it seeks to make sure that we can all enjoy our beautiful beaches and countryside safely without damaging them. It is difficult to ascertain exactly how many fires are caused by disposable barbecues. There is no clear identifier on the fire service's national incident reporting system. My local fire service, Devon and Somerset, believes that is the main cause of local underreporting of fires caused by single-use barbecues.

This summer, a fire at Baggy Point in North Devon was caused by an innocuous accident. People had set a disposable barbecue on a rocky area along the coast. However, the wind picked up the lightweight barbecue and blew it up to the gorse land above. Some 20 acres of gorse land was burned, destroying the habitats and nesting sites of a number of species. Baggy Point is a site of special scientific interest, and it could take decades to recover to its former glory.

The fire took significant resources at a busy time for our services. It took 70 firefighters a full day to put out. That reflects the general trend, which shows that while there has been a slight drop in the number of fires, there has been an increase in the time and resources taken to fight them. Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service recently detailed just how much it cost to put out a significant wildfire. One of its fires cost more than half a million pounds and took 4 million litres of water to put out. While disposable barbecues only cost a few pounds, their impact can be so much more than that. Some 78% of local authorities have experienced fires caused by disposable barbecues. That is despite 49% of local authorities having bans in place, and 64% having signage to discourage use.

While fires are the most obvious issue with single-use barbecues, the intrinsic problem is the cooling period. They are impregnated with highly flammable emollients taking hours to cool down. Even when they have, they can still spontaneously relight. That means people cannot move them when they have finished with them, so they leave them still burning or carry them when cool enough

to pick up, but still smouldering, to a bin. Manufacturer instructions warn against picking up the appliance until it is completely cooled—a process that takes many more hours than most consumers are prepared to give when they head out to the countryside. They are simply not fit for purpose.

Some 88% of local authorities report having to deal with litter from these barbecues. This litter can damage the grass it is placed on, harm wildlife and, if used on sand, the sand heats up and can cause injuries to children and pets. Every summer, there are reports of injuries from hot sand where barbecues have sat, as well as from those that have been buried within the sand. Companies claim their products can reach up to 400°C. While the sand is obviously inflammable, it can hold heat for hours at a time. The most serious of these injuries involves treatment by skin grafts and a long stretch in hospital. We have successful campaigns every summer to educate people about the risks of the water in hot weather. It is time that we similarly take control of the risks that these disposable barbecues cause.

The heat that these barbecues give off also causes damage when people attempt to dispose of them. Some 68% of local authorities say that barbecues have caused damage to bins, and occasionally these fires can also injure frontline waste removal workers. This year saw a barbecue reignite inside a bin lorry. Even when people try to do the right thing, they are causing damage to local amenities. Hazardous waste should not be so easily available, especially in areas of significant importance.

In Keep Britain Tidy's survey of local authorities, it was highlighted that the use of disposable barbecues was most problematic in areas near supermarkets or high streets. That implies that it is casual use by consumers unaware of the risks that leads to most of the issues. That is echoed in the response from Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service, which noted that there were fewer fires than it had anticipated nearer to supermarkets during the hot weather, and it wanted to praise supermarkets that this summer took the initiative to ban these products. However, relying on retailers to decide whether they will temporarily stop the sale of disposable barbecues is simply not sufficient. As a society, the British public have made it clear that they are moving away from single-use culture. We have made great strides to reduce our plastic, with the banning of plastic straws, the massive uptake of reusable cups and bottles, and more and more people incorporating multi-use products into their lives. However, disposable barbecues are still the predominant portable barbecue that people choose to use.

For the cost of only a few pounds, people can set up their own portable fire. While the companies that make these products are at pains to point out that each individual element is recyclable, it is complicated to separate those elements out, and that does not take into account where and when people will be seeking to dispose of them. People are not going to separate out scorching metal and coals and put them into public waste bins, and if they do, as I pointed out earlier, that is not always a safe option.

I look forward to the outcome of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' research project on sky lanterns, barbecues and helium balloons, and I understand that the Government do not want to prematurely act on any sort of blanket ban. However,

[Selaine Saxby]

this Bill seeks to ban their use in a very limited way and to enable local authorities to act where we know that there is a high risk of disposable barbecues causing serious damage.

Once upon a time, we could smoke on aeroplanes, and we used to think that was okay, whereas it is completely unacceptable now. I hope that we will look back on today and wonder why disposable barbecues, which are already banned in France, the United States and even Australia—the home of the barbecue—were ever considered acceptable.

Some 88% of councils that responded to the Keep Britain Tidy survey said they would like to see the Government intervene on single-use barbecues—the highest response to any question asked. Over 27,000 people signed a petition to completely ban the sale and use of disposable barbecues in the UK. We cannot continue to allow the right to scald a sausage anywhere, cause so much damage and destruction and cost so much to our vital public services in dealing with disposable barbecue debris. The time to act is now.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sally-Ann Hart, Mrs Flick Drummond, Jane Hunt, Simon Fell, Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger, Sir Gary Streeter, Theresa Villiers, Dr Neil Hudson, Derek Thomas, Ian Levy, Caroline Nokes and Selaine Saxby present the Bill.

Selaine Saxby accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 January 2023, and to be printed (Bill 196).

Ways and Means

Autumn Statement Resolutions

ENERGY (OIL AND GAS) PROFITS LEVY

Debate resumed (Order, 21 November)

Question again proposed,

That—

- (a) provision may be made increasing the rate at which energy (oil and gas) profits levy is charged to 35%,
- (b) provision may be made reducing the percentage in section 2(3) of the Energy (Oil and Gas) Profits Levy Act 2022 (amount of additional investment expenditure) to 29%, and
- (c) (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made for and in connection with extending the period for which the levy has effect until 31 March 2028.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

The Question is the first Ways and Means motion on the Order Paper. At the conclusion of the debate, the Question on that first motion will be put to the House. I will then put forthwith the Questions on the remaining Ways and Means motions and the money resolution. I remind the House that the scope of the debate is the content of the autumn statement, as well as the motions on the Order Paper.

1.33 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge): It is a privilege to open the second day of debate on the autumn statement for the Government. Last Thursday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor presented this House with a plan to tackle the cost of living crisis and rebuild our economy—a statement that was honest about the challenges we face and fair in its response. His three priorities, and the priorities of this Government, are simple: stability, growth and public services. The people of this country need us to take the difficult decisions on their behalf, and that is what we will do.

In yesterday's debate, we heard how our plan leads, among other things, to lower energy bills, higher long-term growth and a stronger NHS and education system. The subject of today's debate is sustainable public finances and taxation, and the House will understand if I focus my remarks on those aspects of the statement.

For the record, and as the Chancellor revealed, the Office for Budget Responsibility judges that the UK, like other countries, is now in recession. Overall this year, the economy is still forecast to grow by 4.2%. GDP then falls in 2023 by 1.4%, before rising by 1.3%, 2.6% and 2.7% in the following three years. The OBR says that higher energy prices explain the majority of the downward revision in cumulative growth since March. It also expects a rise in unemployment from 3.6% today to 4.9% in 2024, before it falls to 4.1%.

One of the most salient points, and an issue we cannot and will not ignore, is inflation. Last week, the Chancellor called inflation “the enemy of stability”, noting its impact on mortgages, household bills, businesses and unemployment. We are experiencing very high levels of inflation, the primary cause of which, according to the OBR, is global factors. Those who question that

should remember the following: yes, inflation is high in the United Kingdom, but it is higher in Germany, at 11.6%, in Italy, at 12.6%, and in the Netherlands, at 16.8%. The reality is that the pandemic is still casting an economic shadow, with the lasting impact on supply chains having made goods more expensive. As Members will understand, this has been significantly exacerbated by Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

The OBR forecast the UK's inflation rate to be 9.1% this year and 7.4% next year, although I note that the OBR has said that actions taken as part of the autumn statement will help inflation to fall sharply from the middle of next year. Tackling high inflation needs fiscal and monetary policy to work together, with the Government and the independent Bank of England acting hand in glove. It also needs the world to believe that this country will always pay what it owes. Thanks to the decisions this Government have already taken, the OBR has said that the peak of interest rates is likely to be lower than it would otherwise have been, in turn benefiting our economy and public finances.

But we cannot be complacent. That is why we are committed to rebuilding the public finances. The decisions the Chancellor made last week will mean that over the next five years, borrowing is more than halved. This year, we are forecast to borrow 7.1% of GDP, or £177 billion. Next year, it is 5.5% of GDP, or £140 billion, then by 2027-28, it falls to 2.4% of GDP, or £69 billion.

The Chancellor also confirmed two new fiscal rules. The first is that underlying debt must fall as a percentage of GDP by the fifth year of a rolling five-year period. The second is that public sector borrowing over the same period must be below 3% of GDP.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Given that the Government since 2012 have broken virtually every fiscal rule they have set themselves, why should we pay a blind bit of attention to this new fiscal rule? Why would we believe anything that those on the Tory Front Bench say about their fiscal rules, which are brushed aside as and when they feel like it?

James Cartlidge: I always enjoyed intervening on the hon. Gentleman when he was a shadow Minister and I was a Back Bencher, and I have great respect for him. The Opposition may want to airbrush from history the extraordinary events of recent years—the pandemic and now the invasion of Ukraine—but any Government would have to adjust to those circumstances. These were not minor events; they were once-in-a-generation events, and they have had a huge impact.

Overall, the autumn statement delivers a consolidation of £55 billion, with just under half from higher taxation and just over half from spending reductions. The consolidation ensures that excessive borrowing does not add to inflationary pressures and push interest rates up further. In the short term, we are taking difficult decisions to make sure that fiscal policy keeps inflation in check, but doing it in a compassionate way that still provides support to the most vulnerable.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being very generous. The OBR says that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs compliance measures and chasing social security fraud against the Department for Work and Pensions will bring in £2.8 billion, but the Green Book says that

social security fraud is £2.2 billion, which suggests only £0.6 billion coming in from tackling tax avoidance and evasion. Why is that figure so low, when the estimate is £70 billion of tax avoidance and evasion?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman asks a perfectly good question. He will be aware that we have made huge progress on closing the tax gap, which effectively means that we are making huge progress on cracking down on tax avoidance. There is always further to go, but we have scored significant savings from those measures over the forecast period.

The upshot is what the Chancellor rightly called a "balanced path to stability". We are tackling inflation to help all our constituents with the cost of living, while at the same time providing the stability that business needs to be able to invest and grow. We want low taxes and sound money, but sound money has to come first.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): What worries me about the Budget is the lack of focus on how the economy will grow in subsequent years. If we have an austerity Budget, public investment is falling; exports are falling because of Brexit; and consumer spending is going to fall because household budgets are being crushed by the cost of living crisis. That leaves business investment. Are businesses seriously going to invest when all other areas of growth are collapsing?

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The key issue for growth at the moment is inflation. What on earth do we think is causing consumers to rein back spending? The answer is that this year, this country will have to find an additional £150 billion to pay for the higher cost of energy—that is the equivalent of an entire NHS. Yes, we are taking difficult decisions, but that is the best way to ensure that we get inflation down, in partnership with the independent Bank of England, and build the platform of stability that businesses need to grow and invest. On the point about Brexit, if it was causing the problems, why do the Netherlands and Germany have higher inflation? He should think about that.

On tax, the House will have heard the Chancellor say that we will be fair by asking those who have more to contribute more, and by avoiding tax rises that most damage growth. That means, for example, that while some taxes are rising, we have not raised headline rates of taxation. Tax as a percentage of GDP, meanwhile, will increase by just 1% over the next five years.

On personal taxes, we are reducing the threshold at which the 45p rate becomes payable from £150,000 to £125,140, which means that those earning £150,000 or more will pay just over £1,200 more a year. At the same time, we are maintaining at current levels the income tax personal allowance, the higher rate threshold, the main national insurance thresholds and the inheritance tax thresholds for a further two years until April 2028.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): In the summer leadership contest, the Prime Minister set out his plan to see a dramatic cut to the 20p tax rate at the end of this decade. Is that ambition still held by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor?

James Cartlidge: As I have said before, my hon. Friend is a champion for his constituents. In oral questions, he raised an important point about tax on fuel and he now mentions tax on income. We face an extraordinarily difficult position and I am sure that even he would agree that inflation is the ultimate tax. Inflation undermines savings, hits the poorest the hardest and hits the entire economy in every part of the country. We have had to take difficult decisions on income tax, but of course, in future fiscal events, we will announce what we will be doing with taxes.

The current tax changes include the fact that the dividend allowance will be cut from £2,000 to £1,000 next year and then to £500 from April 2024. The annual exempt amount for capital gains tax will be cut from £12,300 to £6,000 next year and then to £3,000 from April 2024. Those are not insignificant changes, but they still leave us with more generous core personal allowances than countries such as Germany, Ireland, France and Canada.

To make our motoring system fairer, we have also decided that electric vehicles will no longer be exempt from vehicle excise duty from April 2025. We are keeping previously announced cuts to stamp duty to support the housing market, but only until 31 March 2025, following which we will end the measure.

Moving to the all-important business taxes, we have decided to freeze the employer's national insurance contributions threshold until April 2028, but we will retain the employment allowance at its higher level of £5,000. That means that the smallest 40% of all businesses—the ones that are crucial to our growth—will still pay no NICs at all.

On VAT, we already have a registration threshold more than twice as high as the EU and OECD averages, but we will maintain it at that level until March 2026. We will implement the internationally agreed OECD pillar 2 global corporate minimum tax rate to make sure that multinational corporations pay the right tax in the right place. At the same time, we will take further steps to tackle tax avoidance and evasion. Further to the intervention of the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), that will raise an additional £2.8 billion by 2027-28.

Ahead of the autumn statement, there was much discussion on the merits or otherwise of windfall taxes applied to profits resulting from unexpected increases in energy prices. Our view is that any such tax should be temporary, not deter investment and recognise the cyclical nature of many energy businesses.

Chris Stephens: The Minister is being generous on these points. Of the 6,000 additional staff who are estimated to be going to HMRC and DWP, what is the split between the new posts that are going to DWP and those that are going to HMRC?

James Cartlidge: In my short time in this job, I have tried to cram a lot of facts into my head, but I do not have that split immediately to hand. I will write to the hon. Gentleman after raising the matter with my officials.

To return to windfall taxes, in that context, we will increase the energy profits levy from 25% to 35% from 1 January until March 2028. We have also decided to introduce a new temporary 45% levy on electricity

generators to reflect the fact that the way our energy market is structured also creates windfall profits for low-carbon electricity generation. Together, those taxes will raise more than £14 billion for the public purse next year.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Minister is being generous with his time. On the specific point of the windfall tax, there have been calls in this place since October last year for a temporary windfall tax on the extra profits of oil and gas companies. Does he accept that, had the Government moved more quickly to do that, they might not have faced as much blame for not reacting quickly enough to the global events that he mentioned and that people would perhaps think that the Government were managing the crisis better? At the moment, a great deal of the criticism is about not the events themselves, but the Government's lack of reaction and poor management of them.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. We introduced a windfall tax in May. When we consider the timeline relative to the invasion of Ukraine, that is pretty swift. By that point, it was clear that we had an extraordinary surge in energy prices. Of course, as a Government, we would not ordinarily want to take such steps, but I think there is consensus that, when profits are rising so sharply and consumers are having to pay such high prices, we should look at putting that kind of regime in place.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Can the Minister tell us more about what he means by "temporary"? Earlier this year, we heard that the windfall tax would be temporary. We have heard about lots of taxes, such as the 45p tax, being temporary. Indeed, income tax, which was introduced in 1799 by William Pitt the Younger, was going to be a temporary measure to deal with the Napoleonic wars, yet here we are dealing with it. What does the Minister mean by temporary, and when will it end?

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; it means until March 2028.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): In response to the criticism of the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) about not responding fast enough to proposals to extend the windfall tax, I would say that changing the rules of the game regarding tax for some of the biggest investors and employers in different regions of the United Kingdom is a huge thing for a Government, so proceeding cautiously in response to changing events and to the precise quarterly profits that those companies posted was exactly the right thing to do.

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend puts it perfectly. These are significant changes for the industries concerned and one should not go about it in a wanton fashion. We have to try to carry the industry with us, which is why, for example, we have a very generous investment allowance in the North sea levy. As I said, I think the wider public support that but he is right that we have to go about it pragmatically to ensure that we balance the interests of investment with raising the revenue.

Let us not forget that that revenue is going to fund support for energy bills at an extraordinary level through the energy price guarantee, which the OBR now estimates will cut £900 from the typical energy bill this winter. Next year, with the new energy price guarantee, a further £500 will be cut. We are taking these difficult measures to be compassionate and help those at the bottom the most: earlier this year, the amount of energy support for the most vulnerable was £650; next year, it will be £900. We are taking serious steps to support the most vulnerable.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): It is extraordinary to hear that response to the question about levying a windfall tax and those comments about the pragmatic approach that the Government took when the oil industry companies themselves were saying, “We’re happy to pay more tax. Take more money from us. We’re making so much money.” So the Government were incredibly slow to act.

James Cartlidge: It is extraordinary sometimes with the SNP—

Neale Hanvey: I am not a member of the SNP.

James Cartlidge: I do apologise—Alba.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It’s a stock answer.

James Cartlidge: It is not a stock answer. How could it be a stock answer when I have not taken an intervention like that before?

The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) will I am sure forgive me but, on his substantive point, we have delivered a significant windfall tax, but with the investment allowance that balances the interests of investment in the sector against needing to raise revenue. I repeat, where is that revenue going? It is to help families throughout the United Kingdom, including in Scotland, because we are stronger together when the support of the Treasury, at the heart of the United Kingdom, helps everyone in every part of this country.

The final issue to address with regard to taxation is business rates, which I know many colleagues feel strongly about. We believe that bills for business rates should accurately reflect market values, so we will proceed with the revaluation of business properties from April 2023. However, we will soften the impact on businesses with a £13.6 billion support package over the next five years. Nearly two thirds of properties will not pay a penny more next year and thousands of pubs, restaurants and small high street shops will benefit. Furthermore, we are extending and increasing the retail, hospitality and leisure relief scheme from 50% to 75% in 2023-24, showing that this is a Government committed to protecting the businesses that make our high streets and town centres successful.

These are not easy times to bring in these sorts of measures, but that does not mean the Government will shy away from difficult decisions. Our priorities, expressed through the autumn statement, are stability, growth and public services. Today, we are debating specific tax measures and the importance of sustainable public

finances, but what the Government are delivering is much more comprehensive than that—an integrated response to what the Chancellor last week called

“a global energy crisis, a global inflation crisis and a global economic crisis”.—[*Official Report*, 17 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 855.]

The bottom line is this: because of the difficult decisions that I have outlined today—the decisions this Government are not afraid to take—the OBR confirms we will see less severe inflation and a shallower recession, but perhaps most importantly, unemployment is forecast to be 70,000 lower than would otherwise have been the case. That is 70,000 real families who will benefit. At the same time, when growth returns, we will be in a better position to pay our debts, ensuring those are not simply passed on to future generations. That is the promise of this autumn statement—a statement that is balanced, honest and fair—and I commend it to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the shadow Minister, I notify colleagues that I do not want to put a time limit on, but my guidance is that, if everybody speaks for eight minutes, we should be able to fit everybody in comfortably. That was the guidance yesterday, so it has been equal on both days. I call Tulip Siddiq.

1.53 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): This week, we have heard lots of statistics and figures flying around. The OBR has estimated that real household disposable income per person will fall by 7% over the next two years. That is the biggest fall on record, taking incomes down to 2013 levels. We have heard that our tax burden is set to rise by around £30 billion more than originally forecast in March. It is the highest level since world war two. We have heard about inflation rising to 11.1 %, a 40-year high, with food prices rising by a staggering 16.4% in the year to October.

Just for a minute, I want to explore what these statistics and figures mean in practice to our constituents and to hard-working people across the country. They mean that a single mother on the South Kilburn estate in my constituency cannot afford to buy a Christmas present for her child. They mean that a hard-working nurse in my constituency who is already struggling to make ends meet and cannot afford her energy bills will be paying more tax. They mean a young carer who is already skipping meals because she cannot afford to eat will fall into more debt and may be pushed into the arms of unethical, unsecure credit loans. In all honesty, can Conservative Members really tell me that the measures outlined in their autumn statement will help vulnerable people such as those in my constituency? Do they think it is fair that my constituents have to bear the brunt of a Tory economic crisis that was built in Downing Street? I am sure the Minister and other Conservative Members will say—

Jonathan Gullis: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Tulip Siddiq: Yes, with pleasure.

Jonathan Gullis: In Labour’s plans, are there any plans for any tax cuts and, if there are, where are they?

Tulip Siddiq: I welcome the hon. Member's intervention. If he listens carefully to my speech and pays careful attention, he will hear all our economic plans laid out, so please pay attention.

The Minister kept talking about how the Government have no choice and how they have made difficult decisions, but the truth is that there is always a choice, and if the Labour party were in government, we would be making fairer choices and better choices that would suit our constituents.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): If I am not mistaken, we have just increased substantially the national living wage, increased benefits in line with inflation and increased pensions in line with inflation, while, unfortunately and regrettably, putting up taxes on the wealthy. Exactly what does the hon. Lady not like about that?

Tulip Siddiq: The things we do not like about this Budget are the fact that the Government will still not impose a proper windfall tax, which I am coming to, will still not abolish non-dom status and will still not listen to us about private schools. If the right hon. Gentleman pays close attention and listens to my speech, he will learn about the things we do not like in his autumn statement.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that, once we get past the smoke and mirrors of this autumn statement, it is nothing more than ideological austerity on steroids?

Tulip Siddiq: As always, my hon. Friend, who is a doughty champion for his constituents, speaks the truth, because when we examine the autumn statement carefully, we see what will actually happen to hard-working people in this country and how they are bearing the brunt of an economic crisis that Conservative Members created in Downing Street.

Alexander Stafford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Tulip Siddiq: I will make a bit more progress, but I will come to the Members in a minute. I am happy to take interventions.

We of course welcome that, after months of kicking and screaming, the Government have decided to adopt Labour's policy of strengthening the windfall tax on energy giants, but they are still leaving billions of pounds on the table by giving a tax break to companies drilling for new polluting fossil fuels. Labour would have raised over £10 billion more—£10 billion, at the time of a cost of living crisis, is an enormous amount—over the next three years than the Government's proposal by closing that unfair loophole, taxing oil and gas at the same level as other countries such as Norway and backdating the tax to January of this year.

Alexander Stafford: The hon. Lady paints a grim picture of the situation—undeniably, there is a grim situation—but she seemed to forget that this Government have spent £400 billion on covid. I remember that, at about this time last year, she talked about choices when Labour was advocating for another lockdown, which

would have done even more damage to our economy. When she talks about choices, does she not agree that spending £400 billion to save jobs, save lives and get us out of the covid situation was the best choice? Yes, we have to pay that money back and that is what we are doing now.

Tulip Siddiq: May I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Tories have been in government for 12 years now and may I remind him about everything that happened during covid, including burning personal protective equipment? Maybe he has forgotten about that, and maybe he has forgotten about the amount of fraud that took place during covid. I can send him the details because he looks incredulous. Maybe he does not know how much fraud there was during covid, but we will send that to him. I also remind the hon. Gentleman that, after 12 years of economic mismanagement by this Conservative Government, the UK is forecast to have the lowest growth in the G7 over the next two years, with growth stagnant over 2023 and 2024. That is not a record the Government should be proud of.

Let me return to the energy companies, because even they admit that they do not know what to do with their excessive profits. The Chancellor chose to protect that tax break for the energy giants and let the cost land on working people. He also chose to ignore Labour's calls to scrap non-dom status, which is currently costing us more than £3 billion a year. Why will the Government not undertake that policy? If Labour was in government, we would be stretching every sinew to generate revenue for the hard-working people of our country.

Peter Dowd: When the Tories came to power in 2010, national debt was just under £1 trillion, yet I remind Conservative Members that it is now £2.4 trillion—so much for the party of sound finance.

Tulip Siddiq: As always, my hon. Friend is right, as is his point about how every time the Conservatives bring in a fiscal rule about lowering debt, they end up breaking it.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): May I ask for some clarity on the hon. Lady's remarks about oil and gas? What exactly is the Labour party's position on whether we should have more oil and gas? If it thinks that we do need oil and gas, what would it do to achieve that?

Tulip Siddiq: I am not quite sure what the hon. Gentleman means. Of course we need more oil and gas, but we have said clearly that we should make fairer choices and tax those who say that they have too much money as excessive profits. That is what we are saying, and the hon. Gentleman needs to listen carefully. Labour would also have ended the VAT exemption for private schools, which would raise £1.7 billion every year. That would have been a fairer and more effective way of fixing the Tory economic crisis and bringing the deficit down, instead of pushing the burden on to hard-working families.

Jonathan Gullis *rose*—

Tulip Siddiq: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman has already had his chance.

What worries me is not just that the Government are failing to adopt fair and straightforward measures to fix the mess they caused, but the fact that there is no plan for growth. I was shocked to hear the Minister say how one of the principles is a plan for growth, because I heard nothing in the autumn statement about growth. We have heard from Conservative Members—I know they will keep repeating it—that this is due only to global factors.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): On growth, the Government are protecting our investment in research and development, and innovation, which is a long-term route to growth. The hon. Lady said that the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) was correct about the deficit and debt, and it is astonishing that we are still having to educate the Labour party, 12 years later, about the difference between deficit and debt. This Government inherited a £149 billion deficit, and every measure they took to try to put that right was opposed by those on the Opposition Benches. No wonder the debt increased when we inherited so big a deficit. It is a good job we got that deficit down, because otherwise we would not have been able to cope with covid in the way we did.

Tulip Siddiq: I am not sure there was a question in that intervention. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his patronising lesson, but Labour Members do not need it. After 12 years of watching the Tories destroy the economy, I am afraid we do not need lessons from Conservative Members.

I am sure we will hear a lot today from Conservative Members about how only global factors are to blame for this country's stagnant growth, but that is shameful. Everyone knows that Britain's problems started long before covid, and long before Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Instead of endless Tory excuses, the public deserve an apology for being made to pay for the Government's last Budget, which sent mortgage rates spiralling, and for 12 years of economic crisis from the Conservatives, which has left the UK completely exposed to external shocks, with inflation sky-high, wages stagnant and living standards in freefall.

When Labour was last in government—since the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) mentioned it—the economy grew by an impressive 2.1%. Since 2010, under the Conservatives, growth has been 1.4%. Conservative Members speak about educating the Labour party, but perhaps they should educate themselves.

The Governor of the Bank of England told the Treasury Committee last week that the US economy has grown by 4.2% since the pandemic, and the GDP of eurozone countries is 2.1% higher, yet the UK economy is 0.7% smaller than at the start of the pandemic. Let us not just blame global factors. We are not performing well as a country, and let us be under no illusions: this Conservative economic crisis has been 12 years in the making.

After over a decade of stagnation, we are not recovering. Guess what? We are heading into a recession. This morning the OECD published its projections—these are not my projections but those of the OECD. First, it believes that the UK will have the lowest growth in the G20 over the next two years apart from Russia. Secondly,

the UK is set to be the only OECD economy that will be smaller in 2024 than it was in 2019. Finally, it shows that we are the only G7 country that is currently poorer than it was before the pandemic.

Labour has a serious long-term plan to get our economy growing again, powered by the talent and effort of millions of working people and thousands of businesses. At the heart of that is our promise to invest in good jobs in British industries through our green prosperity plan. From the plumbers and builders needed to insulate homes, to engineers and operators for nuclear and wind, we will make Britain a world leader in the industries of the future, and ensure that people have the skills to benefit from those opportunities.

We are also pushing forward with our start-up review, which will untangle the problems holding new firms back, and help to make Britain the best place to start and grow a business. In government we will strive to fix business rates, and replace them with a fairer system that is fit for the digital economy and does not put our high street businesses at an unfair disadvantage. Our modern industrial strategy will support the sectors of the future, and an active working partnership with business. Finally, we will fix the holes in the Government's failed Brexit deal so that our businesses can export more abroad.

Businesses across the country are supporting Labour's plan for growth. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) is chuntering from a sedentary position, but he would do well to listen to the chair of Tesco, John Allan, who said that Labour is the only party with a plausible growth plan. The Federation of Small Businesses, which has endorsed our plan to fix business rates so that our high streets thrive, has warned that the Tories' plans in the autumn statement were high on stealth creation but low on wealth creation.

Jonathan Gullis *rose—*

Tulip Siddiq: The hon. Gentleman has had plenty of opportunities—no more giving way.

The Government's failure to make fair choices and grow the economy has seen our public services starved of the resources they need. Not only have Conservative policies been bad for people who rely on public services; they are also economically illiterate. Weaker public services mean a weaker economy. As the OBR has set out, rising long-term sickness and a backlog of 7 million people waiting for NHS treatments is a toxic combination. It all adds up to a labour market that is more dysfunctional than at any time in recent history, with hundreds of people out of work because of long-term sickness under this Conservative Government.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. The role of Prime Minister requires transparency. It may be a matter of personal choice for people not to use our national health service that others so desperately rely on, but does my hon. Friend agree that, for many, it is particularly galling that we have a Prime Minister who does not use the national health service that his party broke?

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention.

Jonathan Gullis: Why does it matter?

Tulip Siddiq: I hear the hon. Member chuntering, “Why does that matter?” It matters because people send us to this House to be their voice, and we are meant to represent the everyday struggles they face. If politicians do not know about the everyday struggles of the NHS, because they have never had to wait in A&E for 24 hours with their child, or hold on to the phone for six hours to get an appointment, they do not know what the NHS needs.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a top-banana speech—it is fantastic. On public services, in Norwich and Norfolk we know that the two local authorities face a combined budget deficit of £60 million, which will have a massive impact on our ability to provide social care to an ageing population. We have heard much from the Government about support for public services, including the NHS, but does she agree that if social care is cut, it is the NHS that bleeds? Everyone knows that, yet the Government have failed to recognise it.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The Chancellor used to be Health Secretary, and when he left that role he said that one of his biggest regrets was not fixing the crisis in social care. It is surprising that, now he is Chancellor, he seems to have forgotten that for some reason. The Government have turned their back on all the people who need that care. My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituency and he is absolutely right to point out the everyday struggles of his constituents.

We know that vacancies are a huge challenge facing the NHS right now in getting waiting lists back down. The Labour party has a plan to fix that with the biggest expansion in medical training in history, including thousands more places for nurses. The Royal College of Physicians estimates that our entire NHS expansion package will cost £1.6 billion a year. We could fund all of that and have some money left over by scrapping non-dom status. Why will the Government not accept that? A leaked email from the Chancellor reveals that he privately supports Labour’s flagship health plan to double the number of medical school places. We have seen that email. Why will he not put that into practice?

Neale Hanvey: The shadow Minister is making a forthright and passionate contribution. If I may, I urge some caution around Labour’s current policy to limit or restrict the number of migrant workers that the UK relies on. I worked in the NHS for more than 25 years and, for the latter part of that, much of our recruitment for specialist staff was from abroad because of successive Governments’ failure to plan. Will she take that on board?

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I will take that on board. When I was in hospital having my children, every single nurse who looked after me through a difficult labour was from abroad, and there has been a 96% drop in nurses coming to work in my local hospital. I absolutely agree with him; that is a fair point to make.

Speaking of children, I will turn briefly to childcare. There was no mention whatsoever of funding for childcare in the autumn statement. The lack of affordable options is keeping parents out of work—I am sure everyone recognises that—and having a devastating impact on our economy. Under the Conservatives, UK childcare costs have increased at twice the rate of wages, and for two thirds of families the cost of childcare is the same as or more than their monthly rent or mortgage payments. Those extortionate prices are simply unaffordable for many parents, and many people are being forced out of the labour market.

We know that 43% of mothers consider quitting work altogether and 1.7 million women are prevented from taking on more paid work due to childcare costs. That is terrible for productivity and detrimental to growth. Once again, whether it is NHS waiting times, cuts in rail investment or a lack of affordable childcare, the British people are paying the price for Tory economic incompetence through weaker public services.

The Tories have lost all claims to be the party of economic responsibility. The Conservatives have broken their own fiscal rules a total of 11 times since they came into government in 2010. They have spent 12 years weakening the economy, and they crashed the markets in the middle of a cost of living crisis, leaving working people like my constituents paying the price.

In government, Labour would do things differently. We would make fairer choices and treat taxpayers’ money with the respect it deserves. We would ensure that the single mother on the south Kilburn estate could buy her child a Christmas present, that the hard-working nurse could turn on her heating during the bitter winter months, and that the young carer I referred to could have three meals a day.

Our country is a great country. We have fantastic strengths. But because of the Government’s choices, we have been held back with 12 years of stagnant growth. It is clear that it is time for the grown-ups on the Opposition side of the House to take charge. It is time for a Labour Government.

2.15 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a privilege to be able to speak in this important debate. After a number of years of not being able to speak from what was my favoured position on the Back Benches, I have chosen to do so because it is the Budget, which impacts on all my constituents and those many businesses and organisations across Aldridge-Brownhills that, for many years, I have not been able to name-check. I hope you will allow me a little indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I name-check one or two of them.

I appreciate and understand that, as a Government, we have to make tough decisions and we face some of the same deep challenges as many other countries around the world. It was right to support people and businesses during the pandemic, and the Government did a fantastic job of that, rolling out furlough, business support and benefits so quickly to help people at a time when many of us—in fact, probably all of us—felt a degree of uncertainty about what was happening. It was also right to develop our fantastic vaccination programme and roll that out. I pay credit to Walsall Borough Council for the work that it did and all the team at the Oak Park leisure centre. Today, it is absolutely right that

we stand in solidarity with Ukraine against Putin's illegal invasion. I have just returned from the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, where it was incredible to see the support from the UK and other NATO members. Putin cannot be allowed to continue with this illegal invasion. It must be stopped.

I turn to the Budget. I mentioned those factors because they set the scene for where we are and why we face a tough autumn statement. I welcome the confirmation from the Government that we will protect the triple lock for pensioners and increase benefits by inflation, which I recently raised in the Chamber with a Minister from the Department for Work and Pensions, as it was of deep concern to my constituents. The raising of the national living wage, the commitments to health and the support for household energy bills are welcome and most needed.

I turn to education. I joined Conservative Members in writing to the Chancellor as, having spoken to my local headteachers about school budgets, I was really worried. Energy prices pale into insignificance against the many other challenges and pressures that they face. I therefore really welcome the Chancellor's decision to allocate £4 billion of extra funding to schools over the next two years. The importance of a good education cannot—and should not—be ignored, nor underestimated, wherever someone lives and comes from and whichever school they go to. I am a proud daughter who went to a comprehensive school and later studied with the Open University to get my master's degree.

We have some fantastic schools in Aldridge-Brownhills. I recently visited Ryders Hayes Primary School in Pelsall, which has an excellent training facility. Just last week, I was at Brownhills Ormiston Academy, where I was honoured to be part of its act of remembrance. In this place, we know that from school and education flow skills, universities, apprenticeships and employment. It is through skills, employability and jobs that we will grow our economy. It is through growing our economy that ultimately we generate the money to invest back in our great country and our people. It is through manufacturing and production that we can trade and export goods as well as services and knowledge. What I really seek from the Government and the Chancellor is more detail on the plan for growth; that is critical.

Research, innovation and silicon valleys are all to be welcomed, but what about manufacturing and the myriad small and medium-sized businesses that form the backbone of local economies—for example, Brownhills Glass, GJF Fabrication, JC Payne and Imperial Bathrooms in my constituency—and the nation of shopkeepers? We also have fantastic companies that support young people, providing training and skills for the future. The drive, ambition and personal commitment of some of those companies are enabling us to grow our local economy and jobs. That has to be applauded.

Returning to business and growth, taxes on fuel, freezing the NICs threshold, the changes to dividend tax, and indeed raiding the R&D tax credit scheme do not do much to encourage businesses and the many hardworking owners of small companies who work hard just to keep their businesses going and to keep them growing. Changes to business rates, which my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary mentioned, are absolutely to be welcomed, as is the targeted support for businesses' energy bills in April, but may I gently

urge the Government to provide as much detail as possible? We need greater clarity sooner rather than later, because that is what will give small entrepreneurs not just stability but confidence.

Small Business Saturday is coming up very soon—at the beginning of December—giving all of us the opportunity to celebrate small businesses in our constituencies. I invite my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary and his team to visit Aldridge-Brownhills and the fantastic businesses we have there—perhaps we could even find a female entrepreneur, given that we as the Government are encouraging female entrepreneurs. They would be welcome.

I could make many other points, on council tax and some of the band tax benefits. I know they will cause some difficulty to some of my constituents—the people who are juggling paying their bills with filling their car with fuel and paying the mortgage. I am conscious of the time, however, and perhaps I should not push my luck in my first outing back on the Floor of the House. It is important that we remain compassionate and that we remain on the side of these people. As you would expect, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall support the Government in the Lobby tonight, but I am grateful to have had the opportunity to put on the record some of my constituents' concerns.

2.22 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Opening yesterday's debate, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said that this was not a return to austerity. That made me wonder what the Government call a forecast drop of 7% per person in household living standards. Over the past 12 years, we have had Tory Prime Minister after Tory Prime Minister after Tory Prime Minister—I could go on, because there have been quite a few of them—telling us that this is the end of austerity, but in that time what we have seen is growing inequality and mortgages rising, and now we have record inflation and energy costs are skyrocketing.

This Tory Government have presided over nothing but austerity, and they offer people no hope of anything else. They have presided over the continued chaotic mismanagement of the UK economy that forces ordinary people to pay the price. That view is shared by many people. When preparing for this speech, I looked at all the different resources—people who have made contact to comment on the Budget statement and the events of the past few months. It was really difficult to narrow them down, because so many people representing so many organisations across business and charities have been critical of the way the Government have handled and are handling things. I will pick out just a few. Paul Johnson, director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, said:

“The truth is we just got a lot poorer. We are in for a long, hard, unpleasant journey...that has been made more arduous than it might have been by a series of economic own goals”.

He went on to mention the disastrous mini-Budget of course, but he also stated:

“Very clearly, Brexit was an economic own goal. Economically speaking that has been very bad news indeed”.

I notice that no one else dares to speak of Brexit in this Chamber, but the damage is real and has been done. Scotland voted resolutely against Brexit; we voted to remain in the EU and were ignored, and now we are

[Drew Hendry]

paying the price. In a very impressive speech, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) made a lot of persuasive arguments, but I noticed again that Labour dares not go there, because when it comes to Brexit, they have taken the clothes off the beach and put them on themselves. It is not good enough.

Let me go further and quote the UN Human Rights Council, which includes nations such as Brazil and which has urged the UK Government to implement an energy poverty strategy that addresses the impact of rising costs on child poverty targets. It has gone further still and asked the UK Government to

“improve food security, in particular for children, adolescents and persons with disabilities”.

Does that make the Tories feel proud? It is almost unbelievable. Scotland deserves much better than that.

The Food Standards Agency consumer insights tracker points out that the proportion of people who cannot afford to eat a healthy balanced diet rose to more than a third in October. More than a third of people cannot afford to eat a healthy balanced diet. A quarter of people reported eating cold food because they could not afford to cook. About a fifth are turning off fridges and freezers with food inside them because they reckon they cannot afford the energy to run those appliances. That is a disgrace. All the nations of the UK deserve better. The people I represent in my constituency and across Scotland definitely deserve better.

The Resolution Foundation points out that, far from the Government taxing the rich, as we have heard in this Chamber—taxing those who can most afford it—it is the people in the middle who will be squeezed by a near 4% hit on their income, which is a bigger hit than high earners will experience. The Resolution Foundation warns that the statement means nearly 20 years of wage stagnation between 2008 and 2027 due to the weak forecast for pay and the effects of inflation, hurting people in their homes, hurting families and hurting children. The foundation further points out that households living in harder-to-heat homes with larger families are particularly hard hit by energy bills—nearly a quarter of them are affected. It is worse for people who live off the gas grid—a large number of people in rural communities of the sort that I and many others represent. Look at what they have been offered. Yes, it is great to see a doubling from £100 to £200 in the support for off-gas-grid households, but that is nowhere near enough. Are Ministers living in the real world? At the moment, the minimum oil or kerosene delivery is £500. The amounts offered will not touch the sides, and people living in off-gas-grid households will pay far more than £4,000 for their average energy bill.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): In mainland UK, heating oil can be bought for 82p per litre, but we in Northern Ireland are paying £1.08 per litre. Fuel poverty is a major problem in Northern Ireland.

Drew Hendry: The hon. Member makes a good point about affordability for his constituents. This is a major issue for people in rural communities across the nations of the UK, especially Scotland, although Northern Ireland fares similarly in having a colder climate. These are big, big issues for people. There is no real acknowledgement

in the autumn statement of the difficulties for people living their real lives in that type of accommodation in those areas.

The OBR pointed out that Westminster’s Brexit

“will result in the UK’s trade intensity being 15 per cent lower in the long run than if the UK had remained in the EU.”

The Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey said the UK has suffered a “dramatically” worse recovery than the US or the EU. Government Members like to pretend that the only things that have happened are the war in Ukraine and the global pandemic, but they must take responsibility for the economic self-harm they have imposed on people across the UK and in Scotland through their Brexit ideology, which is resolutely failing and being proved to fail on a daily basis. Scotland deserves better than that.

The CBI director general says of the situation:

“There was really nothing there to tell us that the economy is going to avoid another decade of low productivity and low growth”.

On labour shortages, he called for a practical approach to immigration and urged the UK Government—he might do the same for the Labour party—to be “honest” with people over the UK’s “vast” labour shortages, and said:

“we don’t have the people we need, nor do we have the productivity.”

Scotland deserves better than this.

Business after business ignored. Organisation after organisation ignored. Expert after expert ignored. The UK Tory Government ignore them all. We have seen non-doms protected. Bankers’ bonuses are now unlimited. Many companies are still avoiding their tax responsibilities and public services are facing their most brutal cuts. The Health Foundation pointed out that the whole health budget amounts to only a 1.2% increase in real terms over the next two years, which is well below the historic average of 3.8%. For Scotland, that means having to draw back on the services we can provide. We are focused on trying to support people with fair pay settlements, so they can navigate the cost of living crisis. The Health Foundation also shows that if spending per person had matched the EU average, the UK would have spent £40 billion more than it has done.

On the climate, where have all the good promises gone? Where have all the warm words gone on taking the global climate crisis seriously? In fact, the autumn statement undermines Scotland’s climate change goals and underlined the dangers of Scotland being held back. The UK Government are pushing ahead with nuclear, which is the most costly and the slowest form of energy to deliver, and has the highest environmental impact. The UK already has the most poorly insulated homes in western Europe. There is nothing to change that situation. They still have not delivered, after a number of betrayals, the Peterhead carbon capture and storage project. They have put a higher—higher!—windfall tax on renewable energy producers than they have on oil and gas. That is quite incredible. They have deterred and deferred the uptake of electric vehicles. At a time when momentum was growing for people to invest in an electric vehicle to be better for the climate, what do this Government do? They introduce a pretty high tax to put people off doing that. People will persevere with their petrol and diesel for a bit longer, and burn more carbon-intensive fuels.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government have been working to protect people, despite a real-terms cut of 10% since December due to inflation. Any Westminster increase as a result of the autumn statement will more than be wiped out by inflation. We prioritised public sector fair pay and are prioritising funding to help households, businesses and people to get through this period, but we are reaching the limit. In fact, the limit of what can be done, without borrowing powers and the powers we need to look after our people properly, has already been reached, in sharp contrast to this place. Under Westminster, we continue to see growing inequality, mortgages rising, inflation rising and energy costs skyrocketing. When we compare countries of Scotland's size or smaller, we find that, for them, independence works. Compared to the UK, those countries are wealthier and more equal, and have higher productivity, lower poverty, lower child poverty and lower pensioner poverty. They have higher social mobility and higher business investment.

Scotland has not voted Tory for nearly 70 years, yet we are saddled with this. Scotland did not vote for Brexit, and we do not want it. Scottish people, families and children are bearing the brunt of Westminster's legacy. Scotland is being denied the people it needs to strengthen its communities, its businesses and our country. Scotland has voted time and time again to have its say on its future. It cannot be denied. The choice is between the toxic approach here in Westminster, or a normal independent country.

2.35 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): It is obviously foolish for the Opposition to pretend that a pandemic and a continental war, with its associated energy shock, would not be felt economically in this country. At the same time, it is clearly preposterous for them to try to talk down the UK economy as some kind of basket case, when we compare very favourably to some of our peers on debt to GDP, employment is still very high and we have an economy that exhibits so many underlying strengths. At the same time, it is fair to say that the autumn statement was greeted with some dismay on the Government Benches. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has obviously had to make some very difficult and challenging decisions, given the economic headwinds we face.

First of all, however, I should point to one of the bright moments in the statement, which was the Chancellor's pledge on education funding. The £2.3 billion extra on top of what is already in the baseline over the next two years was very welcome. I am grateful to the 27 colleagues who, along with me, signed a letter urging the Chancellor not only to protect schools funding, but to invest further. Our view was that one of the groups most hard hit by the pandemic and that awful disease was children. The case for investing further in their education to deal with the backlog, helping them to catch up and ensuring they can have productive lives in the future, felt to us morally strong and it would have been indefensible to cut that spending. We are therefore extremely pleased that he responded in such a positive way.

I have only a few minutes, so I want to outline three lessons from the recent turmoil, two warnings and a hope for the future. The first lesson is predicated on a phrase that does not go down well in either marriages or

politics—the four little words, “I told you so.” For those of us who have been tracking the path of the UK money supply over the last 10 years, the underlying inflation, which was baked into our system and has emerged over the last 12 months, has not, I am afraid, come as any great surprise. The fact that the Bank of England has been slow to recognise the importance of monetarism and money policy over the last couple of years is a cause of great dismay, not least because a number of us consistently raised this issue with the previous Governor when he was in front of the Treasury Committee and since. The denial of the kind of Bank of England orthodoxy that the money supply mattered has come back to haunt us in a big way. The enormous growth in the money supply has outstripped the growth in our economy—yes, coming out of the crash in 2007–08, but in particular coming out of the pandemic—and resulted in the inflation in this country that is now taxing every family. It is hard to see that the Bank has moved with alacrity to deal with it—if anything, I think the criticism is that it has been a bit slow—but I hope the lesson we learn for the future, and on which this House should concentrate and focus, is that the money supply matters. When we look around the world we see consensus around a loose monetary policy for far too long and we need to bear that in mind.

The second lesson is that the Bank's handling of the bond market really matters as well. We had assumed that that was a benign market that we could take for granted, but it became clear that the Bank's hangover from its quantitative tightening—its declaration of sales forward into the market—had a significant impact. That was then exacerbated by the so-called fiscal event. We also bear huge losses on that market from the Bank's dealings. Admittedly, there have been profits in previous years, but the fact that we are bearing about £11 billion-worth of losses from the Bank's trading in that market matters. Also, within that market, we discovered to our horror that pension funds were effectively gambling with borrowed money, shorting inflation through the so-called LDI—liability-driven investment—strategy, which became so systemically problematic for the economy that the Bank had to intervene again. That points to lax supervision and comprehension of the weaknesses in the bond market.

The third lesson is that we as a House have perhaps not concentrated enough on the operations of the Debt Management Office. I have yet to see anywhere an obviously declared policy decision to move our debt more towards index-linked or inflation-linked bonds. We have moved from 6% of our debt being index-linked 10 or so years ago to about 22%. That is a near-quadrupling of the figure. As I think the Chair of the Treasury Committee—my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin)—said yesterday, that effectively means that the Government were shorting inflation. At a time when we had lost track of the money supply, or in fact, had decided that the money supply did not matter, that proved to be a foolish bet.

Bim Afolami: When I was on the Public Accounts Committee a couple of years ago, we looked at index-linked debt on the whole of Government accounts. If I recall this correctly, the answer we received was that there was no long-term risk of widespread inflation because there were global forces that were becoming deflationary,

[Bim Afolami]

rather than inflationary. The points that my right hon. Friend is making illustrate well the poor analysis in that approach.

Kit Malthouse: I completely agree. I remember well debates with Mark Carney, when he was head of the Bank of England, about the combination of a rise in the money supply and the underlying inflationary effects in our economy being masked by deflationary effects, not least of global supply chains, and the fact that we now have so much stuff made and imported from China, as well as the effect of the internet. Once the curtain was pulled back and we had problems with our supply chains—and that curve of deflation bottomed out—lo and behold, the money supply suddenly became important again. Let us hope that we learn that lesson for the future.

Notwithstanding the difficult decisions that the Chancellor has made, another opportunity is coming for us to trim the sails: the Budget in the spring. As we move towards that moment, I hope that we can look towards some positive changes in the global economic environment. Hopefully, the war in Ukraine will start to recede. International container prices are already falling, as are energy costs. We can therefore think again in the spring and I hope that we will bear two things in mind.

First, we need to bear in mind that, in a tight labour market, tax rises can prolong inflation. If we, through tax rises, give people, in effect, a take-home pay cut at the same time as they face higher costs because of their mortgages and generally because of the cost of living, they are likely to start to demand more from their employers. I am afraid that that has a possibility of sparking a wage and price spiral, particularly as we know that the secondary effects of that inflation will take some time—possibly months, if not years—to work their way through the system. I would bear that in mind when we think about possible tax rises, particularly from fiscal drag.

My second concern—I give this warning to Ministers—is that chasing debt to GDP could become a hare that they are unable to catch. If the actions taken from a fiscal and monetary point of view damage our GDP number—if GDP falls—we have to work even harder to reduce costs, or debt, against that number. If the action taken to reduce the numerator in the equation paradoxically damages the denominator, the equation becomes harder and harder to reach. If we base our ability to reach that debt-to-GDP ratio on a lower figure—particularly with a 3% GDP debt limit—through tax rises, the only way to avoid a doom loop is to tax and tax, even if we know that we can never fill in the hole that we are digging.

Finally, let me turn to my hope for the future. When we get to the spring Budget, I hope not only that the global winds that are blowing against us will have receded somewhat, but that, frankly, we can restore our belief in capitalism. My strong view is that the only way that we will get out of this hole—a number of Members have said this in the past few days—is through growth. We will not tax our way to prosperity, nor will we tax our way out of this debt-to-GDP problem. We need to inject growth into the economy. The only way to do that is to let the wealth creators free by loosening the ties

that bind them and by looking at the regulation and taxation on capital, in particular, so that people are willing to take risks. One of the most dismaying choices in the statement was the proposed increase in capital taxes, not least because that changes the risk-reward ratio, meaning that it is less likely that people will go out and start a business.

Although some of the decisions about research and development, including the vast amount of money that is being pumped into that across the whole UK, are extremely welcome, unless there is a strong, pullulating, dynamic private sector out there to pick up the ball and run with it, all the intellectual property that the money creates will just end up overseas, where plenty of venture capitalists and entrepreneurs will be willing to pick that up and run with it.

Believing again in capitalism, allowing people to keep more of their money and to invest it, and building businesses for the future will be critical to our overall success in the months, years and decades to come. As we move towards the spring Budget, I hope that Ministers will look again at the five-year OBR forecast, remembering that it is there not to be fulfilled, but to be beaten and bested. It is there to warn us of what might happen so that we can take action now to avoid it. I hope that come the spring Budget, that is exactly what the Government will do.

2.46 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): There is much to be outraged by here. The Prime Minister was the Chancellor and has been in government for most of the past 12 years, yet the Government blame others for the mess that we are in. They blame economic headwinds, but never turn the blame on the Members who caused the trouble in which we find ourselves.

It has been a political choice to govern like that—to run the economy into the ground; to slash living standards through economic mismanagement; to under-invest in the NHS; and to blame nurses, who are now paid less in real terms than they were when the Chancellor took over the NHS. For 12 years, the Government have under-invested and let stock market speculators make millions and tank the pound. The only growth we have is in inflation.

Real wages in 2022 are still lower in than they were when Government Members came to power in 2010. Families in my Ealing, Southall constituency cannot afford any more of this Government. They need a general election to be able to afford school uniforms, heating and travel.

The Government do not make decisions; they delay. When they had the opportunity to close valuable tax loopholes enjoyed by the richest private schools and private equity fund managers, they did not. Families are now paying the equivalent of over £4,000 more in taxes than they were before the Prime Minister was Chancellor under the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). We can see where this Government's priorities lie. While untargeted tax breaks for oil and gas giants will cost the taxpayer £8 billion over five years, the tax burden for ordinary working people is set to rise to the highest level since the second world war. That is not growth. It is stagnation, and it is shameful. According to the *Financial Times*, last month's stand-in Tory Government cost the country £16.8 billion

in increased borrowing costs. The country cannot afford this Tory Government—not at the fuel pumps, not in the supermarkets and not with mortgage costs.

We are not safe with the Tories either. Under the last Labour Government, the UK was spending 2.5% of GDP on defence; the Tories have not matched that in the 12 years they have run the country. No wonder the Defence Secretary looked so cross after Cabinet last week. On the energy independence that we need to stay secure from Russia, the Chancellor again risks our safety. The measures announced in the statement risk the very future of our solar industry, and the Prime Minister insists on holding to his ban on onshore wind. We cannot afford this Tory Government.

This autumn statement is a wasted opportunity. The chance for a fresh start after the Budget that broke the pound has been squandered. This Government are holding Britain back. We need my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) at the wheel. The current driver is asleep. With a vision for green energy independence, investment, equality and growth, only one party has a plan, and it is on the Opposition side of the Chamber.

2.52 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, you would never imagine from listening to Labour Members that we had just been through the biggest public health emergency in a century, the biggest European war for three quarters of a century and the biggest energy crisis since the 1970s. That is not a light task for any Government to deal with. Yes, of course, as the Prime Minister said, some mistakes were made in the handling of things back in September, but the reality is that this is a challenge facing Governments across the western world. Despite all the rhetoric that I hear from the Labour party, there is much in this country to feel that we can benefit from—it is not universally a bad news story. None the less, like other countries across the western world, we face enormous challenges in turning things round.

I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) about the need to drive growth. He was absolutely right to look back over the discussions of recent years about inflation and whether it had gone away. A simple lesson of economics is that the moment somebody says that something will never come back is the moment we need to start worrying that it will come straight back. Inflation is here and we have to deal with it. It has been driven by a huge increase in energy costs, the destabilisation caused by the war in Ukraine, the collapse in global supply chains in the wake of the pandemic and the continued lockdowns in China, which have created real issues for businesses here and internationally.

I want to focus on three things. One of them is very much a UK problem, which we have to deal with as a matter of urgency: the number of people who have left our labour force in the past few years. This country is much more seriously affected than other nations. We have to get to grips with the problem. The explanations for it are multifarious—it is not simply about long covid or backlogs in the NHS—but if we do not solve it, it will be a continuing issue.

I call on Conservative Front Benchers to look back at what we did in 2010. As the Labour party has conveniently forgotten, we inherited unemployment at nearly 3 million and rising, and real difficulties in our labour market. The programmes we put in place made a real difference to the long-term unemployed and to people who were sick, off work and claiming employment and support allowance: they helped them, step by step, back into the labour market. Over the years, they made a real difference to the situation that the long-term unemployed in this country face.

The reality is that the longer someone is out of the workplace, the more difficult it is to get back in. People need support and guidance. I was very encouraged by what the Chancellor said about increasing Access to Work coaching, but we need to go much further. We need to learn from what was done in the Work programme and other programmes and look at how we can put support back in place for the long-term unemployed. If we do not do something about it, they will become further and further away from the workforce.

Stephen Crabb: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Does he agree that one of the most worrying aspects of the trend that he highlights is the increase in younger people being signed off as long-term sick, often with mental health issues? They are not being treated effectively by our NHS and are not getting effective employment support either, so they are at the greatest risk of spending the rest of their life cut off from the labour market.

Chris Grayling: Absolutely—that is a crucial issue. We need to start working with those people to help them back into a workplace environment. They are better off there: if people are out of work, they tend to have poorer health, live less long and have mental health problems. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

We must now put back some of the conditionality that, for understandable reasons, was taken away during the pandemic. There cannot be an expectation that people will simply stay on out-of-work benefits indefinitely. Our welfare state should be a ladder up which people climb, not a place in which people live.

My second point is about energy. There is no doubt that we have to do more to drive energy independence in this country. I have listened to Labour and SNP Members: they seem to think it is better for this country to ship gas all around the world in great tankers, with much higher emissions as a result, than to generate it from the sources available in this country. We need UK gas and we should develop it. The tax measures that have been put in place to encourage investment in the North sea are the right thing to do.

It cannot just be about fossil fuels, however. It is also right to develop nuclear. I completely disagree with the SNP on the issue: renewables are an essential part of our future, but the reality is that the wind does not always blow and the sun does not always shine. We need a core capacity to generate electricity in this country, and nuclear will be a crucial part of that. We also need to drive more progress on the renewables front. The most obvious missing piece is to ask why we do not have an obligation in this country, as a matter of rule, to put solar panels on the roofs of new houses and commercial

[Chris Grayling]

buildings. I say to Government Front Benchers that that should be central to our policy. I have supported it for a long time, and I know other Conservative Members support it. We really need to get on with it.

Thirdly, a project that commands support on both sides of the House and that must drive future growth is the expansion of Heathrow airport. When we voted on it in this House four years ago, it had a majority of nearly 300. There was support from Labour and from the SNP—not the party, but individual Members. There was support from Northern Ireland, from Wales and from across England. It is a project that would lead to better regional connectivity, helping the levelling-up agenda, and would strengthen our trade ties around the world. It is essential. It is a project that has somewhat lost its way because of the pandemic's impact on aviation, and there are clearly issues to address around aviation emissions, but this is not a project that will happen overnight. It will take a decade to bring to fruition, and by the time we get into the 2030s we will have short-haul planes coming on to the market that will be driven by new generation fuels such as hydrogen and sustainable aviation fuel.

We cannot simply say to future generations, “We are going to can this project. We are not going to invest in our main gateway to the world; we are going to leave this to one side.” Those on the Labour Benches, the Northern Irish and Scottish Benches and the Conservative Benches all voted for it, and there is a duty on all of us to throw our political weight behind the project to get it back on the agenda and moving forwards. We need to take a symbolic step that would send a message to the world that this country is focused on growth. I say again to those on my Front Bench: please bring the Heathrow expansion project firmly back on to the Government's agenda. This country needs it. We have needed to take difficult decisions. It has been essential in the short term to take decisions that are going to be difficult and unpopular, but now we have to focus. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor is absolutely right about the Budget in the spring. We need to focus on getting the economy growing again.

3 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The autumn statement last week failed to put forward a serious plan for growth. Instead, the Government have put the cost of their economic mismanagement on to families, and those who will suffer the most will be the middle and lower wage earners.

This is a pattern we have seen from the Tory Government since they took office 12 long years ago. Since then, we have seen five Prime Ministers and seven Chancellors. We have also heard different promises being made to the country about a long-term economic plan, a strong and stable Government, getting Brexit done and an oven-ready Brexit deal. We have also heard about “growth, growth, growth” and about being ready to rebuild, ready to unite and ready to restore trust. Against all of that, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, living standards will fall by 7% over the next two years. I might also add that the UK is now the only G7 country with a smaller economy than before covid.

The last thing families in Lewisham East need is yet another round of austerity, but sadly that is what they are getting. This time last year, I told the then Chancellor—now the Prime Minister—that the local housing allowance was far too low, but I was ignored. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that failing to increase the local housing allowance leaves renters and low-income households the hardest hit. With the allowance at its current level, people are being left in unfit homes. Last week, I was contacted by a constituent who was anxious about the welfare of her children. They are living in accommodation with severe damp and mould, alongside infestations of mice and rats. I am deeply concerned that one of the children has a dry cough, breathing problems and nosebleeds. That is unacceptable, especially since Awaab's death from exposure to mould shocked the nation last week. It is a dereliction of duty for this Government to allow my constituents to live in those conditions.

The heart of the problem is that the Conservatives are not what they claim to be. They are not a compassionate Government who put the needs of deprived communities and people first. A further report has stated that almost one in three children in the UK are living in poverty. That is absolutely outrageous.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I hear the plight of the families that the hon. Lady mentions, but those properties should never have been allowed to get into that state in the first place. Who is responsible for looking after those properties? Would it be the local council? Why did it not go round to fix the mould problems in the first place?

Janet Daby: The Government really need to take responsibility for cutting budgets. Local budgets have been decimated since 2010, austerity has increased and my own local authority's budget has been cut by 50%. Councils are unable to provide the services that are so desperately needed. We see this when we look at universal credit. I am pleased about the increase in the national minimum wage, but when we look at when that is going to be put in place and at the increase in taxes, there are so many issues that make it more difficult for families.

Furthermore, children who grew up during the pandemic are going to face tougher challenges than previous generations. For instance, according to the Local Government Association, the number of children needing help from councils for mental health issues has increased by 53% in the past four years, yet the autumn statement has put nothing in place to deal with that situation. This could have been a compassionate statement. A warm homes programme to insulate people's homes would have been a start, but the Government have chosen not to do that. Instead, the less well-off have been unfairly hit while the bankers have been given tax breaks. The Chancellor and the Prime Minister might be trying to appease both wings of the Tory party, but they are failing the country in the process. We need a general election.

3.5 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): It has been clear from this debate and the previous debate that the backdrop to our economic discussion is one of continuing post-pandemic global economic disruption and the rise of global inflation, caused not least by Putin's invasion

of Ukraine. If anyone still believes that we do not live in an interconnected and interdependent world, they are simply not looking at the evidence around us.

Part of the difficulty in assessing the data is the opacity of some of the figures on post-pandemic global trading and investment, but some patterns are now clearly beginning to emerge. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, in the fourth quarter of 2021, UK imports from the European Union dropped by 18%, but global imports from the rest of the world were up by more than 10% and UK exports to the European Union in July this year reached an all-time high of £17.4 billion. In other words, despite the fact that there are greater barriers to trade on the European Union side than on the UK side, British exports to Europe are actually managing to be more robust than European exports to the United Kingdom. So let us be clear: we do not need a new relationship with the European Union, Swiss or otherwise. We do not require freedom of movement, integration into the European single market or integration of EU law into the UK.

Kit Malthouse: My right hon. Friend has outlined some impressive figures. Does he recall that one of the themes of the Brexit debate was that our trading patterns should change? We said that there was a big wide world out there to which we had to look, from a trade point of view, that we had become over-reliant on the EU and that there were more exciting markets elsewhere that were growing much more strongly and that we could participate in.

Dr Fox: I entirely agree. The concept of the bloc in trade terms is very second half of the 20th century. We need to look at the growing markets that give greater opportunities for the United Kingdom in goods and services. The fact that they are not immediately geographically adjacent to us should not be our primary concern. We need to move with the trends in the global economy, not focus on what is a largely ossified view of the world based on the post-second world war consensus.

When we look at the origins of the inflation that we are facing in the United Kingdom, we see that there are several of them. They have been referenced a lot during this debate. The post-pandemic supply issues are still ricocheting around the global economy and particularly harming developing countries at the present time. Also, the central banks—not just the Bank of England but the Federal Reserve in the United States and the European Central Bank—got into a group-think on what they laughingly call the modern monetarists, which means that they are not monetarists at all. They believed that they had found some sort of monetary alchemy through which they could continue to print money faster than the economies were growing without creating inflation. I believe that is why there is higher inflation in the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe than in other countries—notably Switzerland, which sits in the middle of the eurozone but did not follow the same expansionist monetary policies.

By far the greatest boost to inflation has come from Putin's invasion of Ukraine, however. That has come about in a number of ways, which I will come to in just a moment, but we must remind ourselves that inflation is not just an economic evil; it is a moral and social evil as well. The poorest people in our society are hit the

hardest by inflation because they spend more of their income on non-discretionary items. It also transfers money from the savers to the borrowers in society, which is not something that a Conservative Government should want to see. The Government have done much in this statement to protect those on low and fixed incomes, including an extra £26 billion in cost of living support, particularly on fuel, on top of what we have spent already, and an extra £11 billion on uprating benefits. The Government introduced those two items to protect those on low and fixed incomes and, taken together, they are the size of the United Kingdom's defence budget. These are not small sums. Our increased spending on education and health is hugely welcome, especially as we catch up on the post-pandemic disruption, but to be frank, even the generous sums put forward by the Government will largely be eaten up by inflation until we get it under control.

And that is before we come to the most frightening item of all, the fact that this year we will be spending £120 billion on debt interest payments. For reference, we spend only £134 billion on NHS England each year, so we are spending almost the NHS budget on debt interest payments. We need to recognise that we cannot increase our debt further. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) said, around 20% of our debt is now index-linked and is therefore very vulnerable to rises in the retail price index. Duncan Simpson, the chief executive of the TaxPayers Alliance, said:

"The spiralling cost of servicing the national debt is deeply concerning. Taxpayers' money that should be spent on frontline services or keeping rates down is instead going towards interest payments that outsize the costs of government departments."

If we cannot raise debt any further, either we have to see spending come down or taxes go up, or we have to increase Britain's wealth from the rest of the global economy. The latter is difficult in current global conditions and the Government have correctly, but rather disappointingly, from a political perspective, had to see taxes rise. That sets a clear way in which to see our future priorities. The first thing is to bear down on inflation. At the same time, we have to get control of the public finances and then we have to get our taxes back down.

I hope the Opposition will reflect on this point today. We have heard from the Opposition Front Bench on both days of this debate that we are facing a recession made in Downing Street. Currently, the greatest source of global inflation is Putin's invasion of Ukraine and rising global commodity prices, particularly food and fuel, which is causing potential starvation in vulnerable states, with widespread social dislocation and increased international migration.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Fox: I will not give way.

Those who talk about a recession made in Downing Street might want to ask themselves how much they are absolving Vladimir Putin of the global inflation we see today and whether, in fact, they are neglecting their duty to be patriotic at this time.

Conservatives do not want to see taxes rise. If we have to see temporary rises in taxation, the necessary corollary is that, as soon as inflation starts to be controlled,

[Dr Fox]

we will see those taxes coming down again. I would go further than my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire in one respect: this is not just a debate about growth, because any dummy can borrow tomorrow's money to spend today and call the increased activity "growth," which has been central to every Labour Government since the second world war.

The Government need to focus on wealth creation, in which we turn our unique intellectual property into goods and services that do not exist today, or into better goods and services than exist today. That means dealing with the supply-side constraints on the economy, making more private capital available to scale up companies, getting more international investment in the United Kingdom and making us more competitive globally. No one in the world owes us a living, and no Government can guarantee increasing living standards to the next generation. Only a successful free-market country in a free-market world can achieve that, and the sooner we get there, the better.

3.13 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): This is a cost of chaos Budget. Everyone is now paying the price for Conservative incompetence. This Conservative Government crashed our economy with their reckless, unfunded tax cuts. They have presided over years of low growth, low investment and declining productivity, and now they are eroding our public services and hiking taxes on ordinary people, all while slashing taxes on the big banks and refusing to close the windfall tax loophole that has allowed Shell to avoid paying a single penny.

The British people need a Government with a plan for a fairer economy that can secure future prosperity.

Dr Fox: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Olney: I will not give way, as the right hon. Gentleman has just spoken.

The British people need a Government who truly value public services, and who focus on removing barriers to economic growth by tackling workforce issues and rebuilding trade, yet all we have instead is Conservative chaos and incompetence. Thanks to the Conservatives' economic mismanagement, Britain is getting poorer; we are all getting poorer.

Families across the UK are set for the largest fall in living standards since records began. The coming months will see family budgets put under extreme pressure. Mortgage payments are set to explode, doubling to their highest level on record next year. Energy bills will be almost £2,000 a year higher than they were in 2021, and the weekly shop is becoming more and more expensive. This is simply unmanageable with the tax rises announced by the Chancellor.

The Conservatives' disastrous mini-Budget cost the public finances £30 billion, and now the Government have hiked taxes by £24 billion, forcing the public to clean up their mess. Everyone will be hit by unfair stealth tax rises, and more than 5 million people will be dragged into a higher band as a result, yet they will not see any benefit from the higher taxes they pay.

The Conservative Government are trying to pin the blame for all our economic woes on global factors, but the fact is these global challenges are hitting the UK harder than other major economies. We are set for the worst GDP decline in Europe next year, we are the only G7 country to have a smaller economy than before the pandemic and we have the third lowest growth forecast in the OECD.

Businesses are also really struggling right now. Conservative chaos and incompetence are forcing small businesses to suffer under crippling uncertainty, and many have already closed their doors. Last week, I spoke to a group of independent publicans in my constituency, and every single one had grave concerns about the future viability of their business. One publican told me that their current situation is 10 times worse than during the pandemic, because this time round they have no support from the Government. The business rates relief announced in the autumn statement is cold comfort to a sector that was promised a fundamental review of the unfair rates system. The previous reduction of VAT to 5% gave hospitality a lifeline during the pandemic, and the publicans I speak to say that a return to this rate would provide much-needed relief in the new year as the cost of living really starts to bite.

Publicans also need urgent clarity on energy bill support after April, as they will not be able to survive without continued assistance. I urge the Government to listen to the concerns of the hospitality sector, which is so integral to business, British industry and local communities. I would welcome a statement from the Minister for Enterprise, Markets and Small Business, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), on the steps the Government will take to support hospitality in the months ahead.

I was pleased to hear the Chancellor finally acknowledge workforce constraints in his speech last Thursday. Economic inactivity is a huge barrier to growth, and I welcome the review of the issues holding back workforce participation. In his review, I urge the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to consider the impact of our inadequate childcare system on women's participation in the labour market.

The Conservatives must also accept that their failure to deliver effective public services has led to a dramatic increase in the number of people who are long-term sick. The OBR forecasts that an additional 1.1 million people will need health and disability benefits in four years' time, taking the number registered as unable to work to a record high of 3.5 million.

The UK's labour shortages cannot be filled by a review of workforce participation alone. We must also look at our broken visa and immigration system, and acknowledge the impact that Brexit has had on our labour market. Brexit has also been disastrous for UK trade. Rather than opening up opportunities for global trade, businesses have been inundated with red tape. The OBR forecasts that the UK's trade intensity will be 15% lower in the long term than if we had remained in the EU. Trade is vital for economic growth. It is way beyond time that the Government finally got a grip and started rebuilding our trading relationships.

The Liberal Democrats are the only party with a comprehensive plan to rebuild trust and co-operation with Europe, to rebuild ties with our largest trading partner and to grow our economy. The Conservatives

have no plan for future prosperity. We need a plan for an innovation-led economy aligned to net zero; one that sustains economic growth and fuels a fairer society with high-quality public services. Instead, the Conservatives have inflicted higher taxes and weaker public services on everyone, all without a proper mandate and all to pay for the damage that they caused in the first place.

3.19 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). I want to take a few minutes to make a few brief points, which I hope go with the flow of some of the excellent speeches we have heard. Before I do, I want to say something about the nature of last week's autumn statement. One Opposition Member said that it was full of smoke and mirrors, but it was nothing of the sort. It was a straightforward, honest, blunt assessment of our economic situation and fiscal circumstances. Before the autumn statement, I made the point that if anybody in this House could be trusted to come up with the most "untricky", straightforward, honest fiscal event, it is the Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), and that is exactly what he did.

Opposition Members have been suggesting, yet again, that we are not spending enough and we need to spend more. I say to them that all the way through the pandemic and the lockdowns, theirs were the voices calling for further lockdowns and more restrictions. Even though we were spending hundreds of billions of pounds supporting families and businesses, Opposition Members were calling for yet more spending. Who did they think was going to pay for that? These moments of reckoning we are facing were always going to come, and the statement presented by the Chancellor last week reflected the honesty of that.

As other Members have said, the backdrop to the statement is the global energy crisis, which is fuelling the cost of living pressures that so many families in our constituencies are facing. An extraordinary number of households in this country lack basic financial resilience; they do not have the savings and reserves to enable them to withstand the shocks we have seen in the past two to three years. So I welcome the cost of living measures that my right hon. Friend has brought forward in the autumn statement.

We have heard the idea that this package lacks either compassion or financial firepower behind it, but next year alone the cost of living measures will cost £26 billion, and that does not include the extra £11 billion cost of the full uprating of working-age benefits. As one voice who had consistently been calling for the full social security uprating at this event, I welcome the clarification that the Chancellor brought, but this is a very expensive policy. We are talking about implementing the triple lock on the state pension and the full uprating of social security for working-age people by 10.1%.

David Linden: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for being one of the few voices on the Government Benches who have spoken about the need to uprate benefits. However, does he not agree that part of the problem with the cost of living crisis, which is not necessarily a new thing, is that it highlights the inadequacy of the current social security system and

why we must have a root-and-branch review of what had gone wrong long before the war in Ukraine and long before covid?

Stephen Crabb: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I will go on to say something about that, but I agree with the point he is making.

Over the past 10 to 11 years, what the Government have done, in essence, is hold back increases in working-age benefits while boosting the state pension for older people. That is very much part of the picture. When wages did not increase in the way we wanted them to, following the last financial crisis, we saw an increase in in-work poverty as a direct result. I wish to flag up three areas that should be longer-term concerns for this Government.

I welcome the additional spending on health and education announced in the autumn statement, but let us not forget that our spending on education, as a percentage of GDP, has been squeezed over the past 10 or 20 years; this is a long-term trajectory. As a country, we are not spending anything like as much as we should be on our skills and vocational education if we are to see increases in productivity. We are also not spending as much as we should on our armed forces and on defence. We are not spending what we should be on these other areas because three large areas are not sustainable in the long run and they are constraining Chancellors of the Exchequer in their decisions.

The first area I wish to flag up is the triple lock. I called for it to honoured during this cost of living crisis, but there are long-term question marks as to its sustainability. I asked the House of Commons Library to do some calculations for me. It found that over the past 10 years if we had increased the state pension by CPI—the consumer prices index—inflation rather than by the triple lock measures, we would have saved almost £13 billion. If we had applied the same uprating measures to the state pension as we did to working-age benefits, that figure would have become about £23 billion. The triple lock is a very expensive long-term policy. It has played a hugely important role in lifting many pensioners out of poverty—no one will forget the derisory 75p increase in the state pension that the last Labour Government made—but I want those on the Treasury Bench to bear in mind that we need a more honest discussion about that area.

The second area to mention, which has already been flagged up this afternoon, is working-age benefits and economic inactivity. Some 9 million people in this country are economically inactive. Many of them have good reasons for this, such as older people and students, but there are millions of people in this country who could work—many of them want to work—but are finding themselves increasingly distant from the labour market.

Chris Stephens: The right hon. Gentleman will know that the Select Committee on Work and Pensions is looking at some of what he is discussing. Is he as concerned as I am that a good number of disabled people were in work during the pandemic but there has been an increase in unemployment among them since, because employers are moving away from home working? We need to look at incentives to help disabled people, particularly in respect of home working, and to be creative in some of our thinking.

Stephen Crabb: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's point. A number of trends since the pandemic should be causes of concern: the drop in the number of older workers; the increase in younger people with mental health issues who are being signed off on long-term sick; and the trend in disabled workers that he mentions. There is a lot there that the review of working-age people needs to get to grips with. We all meet employers in our constituencies who complain that they cannot hire workers and cannot find enough staff, yet we are paying millions of people to not work. There is a hugely important job to be done in this area in the longer term.

The final area I wish to flag up is NHS spending. For an increasingly large number of people, certainly in my constituency, the vision and model of the NHS is just not working. NHS dentistry is ceasing to operate for a great many families. People are emptying their savings accounts so that they can go private to pay for hip and knee replacements, which they cannot get on the NHS. That is happening under the Welsh Labour Government in Wales, but some of the same pressures and trends are at work elsewhere in the country as well.

We continue to find more and more funding for the NHS every year, but this health service is not meeting needs, particularly those of working-age people. We are not seeing people who are facing long-term sickness getting their health needs addressed. Especially important—I flagged this earlier but I will finish by reiterating it—is the crisis in mental health in our country, particularly for younger people. If we do not invest in mental health and real solutions for younger people, we are going to see increasing numbers of them signed off as long-term sick.

3.28 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): Last week's autumn statement failed to address our major economic problems. We have had 12 years of cuts leading to the collapse of our public services. The Government are now proposing another round of austerity, but, Mr Deputy Speaker, there is nothing left to cut.

The Chancellor's statement leaves people facing a winter of hardship, with the Institute for Fiscal Studies admitting that we have just got "a whole lot poorer". It leaves our NHS, councils, schools, transport and police all unable to cope financially. It does nothing for small businesses struggling with bills and at risk of going under, or for new businesses, such as the independent vet practice, Bridge Referrals, in Boldon in my constituency, which has raised its concerns with me about soaring energy bills.

The statement also does nothing for our local government services. Councils have lost billions from their budget and cannot cope with more cuts. It does nothing for public sector workers who have seen their pay eroded—their wages are worth less now than they were in 2010. The autumn statement proposes more real-terms pay cuts, pushing more public service workers into food poverty. We have already seen reports that nurses, teachers and firefighters are now reliant on food banks. It does nothing for our NHS. As Health Secretary, the current Chancellor caused a huge amount of damage to our NHS with cuts and privatisation, leaving us with a waiting list of 7 million, 132,000 staff vacancies across our NHS, and another 165,000 vacancies in care. Now

he wants to pretend that the NHS is being protected. Well, it is not. We can all see the push towards a two-tier system that prices the poorest out of healthcare.

There was nothing in the autumn statement to protect the lowest paid and most vulnerable in our communities. With average rent up by more than 8%, and some landlords asking for as much as a 15% rise, there was nothing to protect private renters. There was nothing for the 800,000 children living in poverty who do not even get a free school meal, and nothing for families who are living in fuel and food poverty.

I am in daily contact with people who are struggling—struggling not with a choice of heating or eating but because they are now unable to do either. Kathleen, a 73-year-old woman from Wardley in my Jarrow constituency, emailed me to say that she has cut back on both heating and eating and does not know what else to do. Then there is the couple living in Hebburn with two kids. A year ago, they still donated to the food bank. Now, they are using it themselves. They are turning to the food bank for blankets to keep warm and food for their kids. They have given up their car. They are both still working, but their bills and food prices have risen so much that they are now struggling and are at risk of losing their home.

So many people tell me that they cannot see any hope of things getting better. There is no light at the end of the tunnel. That is what the last 12 years of a Tory Government and the Chancellor's autumn statement have done, and are doing, to our communities. On top of this, the autumn statement will force families such as the couple in Hebburn to pay more in tax, as the freeze in the income tax threshold equals a pay cut for millions. We have a stealth tax rise and a rise in council tax. We cannot carry on like this.

When the Chancellor said that the UK will "pay our way", he meant that our communities will pay. When he said, ahead of his autumn statement, that "everyone will have to make sacrifices",

he did not actually mean everyone. The UK billionaires who increased their wealth by £55 billion last year will not be making any sacrifices. The companies that made obscene excess profits will not be making sacrifices. Those who can afford to make sacrifices are not being asked to pay for the crisis that their class has caused.

The OBR's assessment is that this never-ending austerity will lead to a further decline of 7% in our living standards. Yet the Chancellor claims that his Government are compassionate. There is nothing in the autumn statement that shows compassion. A compassionate Government would ensure that our kids were not hungry. A compassionate Government would introduce a one-off 1% wealth tax on households with more than £1 million, generating £260 billion, but, instead, the Government are content to force people into deeper poverty while lifting the cap on bankers' bonuses. People in our communities need investment, not more cuts. In her summing up, will the Minister tell us when the Government will stop making the political choice to keep people in poverty?

3.34 pm

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): "There is nothing in the autumn statement that shows compassion" was one of the last sentences from the hon. Member for Jarrow

(Kate Osborne). With the triple lock protected, benefits up by 10.1%, the household energy cap extended, a £900 support package for households on means-tested benefits, £300 support payments to pensioners, £150 to individuals on disability benefits, energy bill support extended into next year, a below-inflation 7% cap on social rents that will save the average renter £200, the education budget protected at £2.3 billion—she did mention children—and an increase in NHS spending of £3.3 billion, is there anything but compassion running through this autumn statement?

I am happy to go so far on economic policy. There is a fair cop that we have made some mistakes on economic policy—that is a perfectly fair cop. But we cannot go into a different galaxy of common sense, where there is no economic credibility, and pretend that that is the reality. I have to question those on the Opposition Benches: if their solution to the economic crisis we face hinges on non-dom status and private schools and does not mention private enterprises, growth and global factors, we are in a different galaxy.

I will go back to where I was planning to start my speech by saying that I had the great pleasure of being parliamentary private secretary to the Chancellor—or more accurately Chancellors—in the build-up to the statement. I must say that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is a fantastic Member of Parliament and last week delivered an incredibly difficult statement both eloquently and with an underlying level of compassion that we should be very proud of.

The Chancellor set out quite firmly the circumstances we face as a country. All these factors—the pandemic we have gone through, in which we spent £400 billion trying to keep the economy on track, the supply chain issues that came from that global pandemic, the damage that has done to the businesses up and down the country and the costs they face, the increases and challenges to shipping or the 630,000 people who have dropped out of the workforce since the pandemic—are inflationary and have created huge pressures. The OBR report, which I am sure the Labour party has read with great interest, clearly identifies global headwinds as the primary cause of the situation we are in. Does anybody from Labour want to challenge that? No—we are moving on.

The second thing we must look at is Vladimir Putin's war. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) made some interesting points about patriotism and how we address these economic circumstances. We have spent £2.3 billion as a country on the situation in Ukraine, but there has been something along the lines of £150 billion of additional spending on energy within our economy over the past year. That is a huge increase; as the Chancellor would quickly point out, it is another NHS, and £55 billion of that is coming from Government coffers—again, I would suggest compassionately—to households and businesses up and down this country.

We face a challenge of inflation, of war on our doorstep and of global markets losing confidence. That has a ripple-down effect and, unfortunately, the circumstances we find ourselves in mean that the Chancellor had to make some difficult decisions. I think he did so in a way that tries not only to help individuals and families with the cost of living but to provide confidence that Britain can pay its way in the world. When Opposition Members bandy around somewhat childish policies,

whether on non-dom status or private schools—it doesn't half feel as if we are back in the 2015 election with those two; I cannot wait to see the new version of the “Ed stone”—it seems to me as if we are on a different planet.

I wanted to add some notes of caution, however, because I was not entirely happy with everything in the statement. First, there are the labour shortages we face. We increased working-age benefits—I believe there is a compassionate argument for that—and the minimum wage, but our small businesses are struggling to recruit and retain staff, and I worry about the impact that that will have on the labour market. It will have to be monitored very closely.

Secondly, more money for the NHS is of course welcome, but only if we see a proportionate increase when it comes to outputs. We have left the NHS in a difficult situation: covid restrictions are still in place in a lot of venues, and we need to remove them as quickly as possible. Hospitals have been operating at around 80% to 85% of capacity en masse. We cannot get back to previous levels and clear the backlog, which requires us to go above 100%, if we are operating at an 85% building capacity.

However, I very much welcome the Chancellor's comments on having a workforce plan, which will help to create a longer-term, sensible solution for the NHS, particularly in dentistry and mental health, in which our workforce numbers are woefully low.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mark Fletcher: I am in full flow, but I am happy to give way.

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and, in particular, for raising mental health. I have been looking just today at the startling figures stating that 215 young people took their lives in 2021—the highest figure since records began. The workforce needs nurses and doctors, but also psychologists and mental health professionals going forward—I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests on that point. It is crucial that we address those issues to support young people and their potential.

Mark Fletcher: I completely agree. We have to be aware of the situation that the pandemic created in mental health. We talk about and acknowledge mental health a lot more, which is a positive thing for society, but our health workforce is well behind where we are as a society on conversational issues. We also have to address pressures relating to image and social media, which affect young people in particular, and the fact that, although we are all so much more connected through mobile devices, we are so much more isolated and judge ourselves in those circumstances. I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point.

Jonathan Gullis: On mental health, I am sure that my hon. Friend will back the cross-party “No Time To Wait” campaign that I launched with my friend James Starkie. Our pilot from the Royal College of Nursing is ready to be picked up by the Government to get more

[Jonathan Gullis]

mental health nurses into GP surgeries. We know that 40% of all GP appointments are now related to mental health. Will my hon. Friend be a doughty champion for that cause?

Mark Fletcher: Well, what choice do I have? As a note of caution, I think we get a little lost when we talk about GP practices. I am not sure that the model of primary care that we have become so used to is necessarily the most efficient. There are other models, and indeed, using online technology can sometimes be considerably better. I add that note of caution about using GP practices, but other than that, my hon. Friend is a fantastic champion and he has got his clip for social media.

I will add another note of caution, about education. The increase in the schools budget is incredibly welcome, but I am slightly concerned about the lack of mention of further education. Some of our colleges are in a very difficult situation, and I worry that we may not have addressed that in the autumn statement. That is also somewhat underlined by the investment zones and the fact that the Chancellor announced a shift towards using higher education in particular in less-well-off areas, which, I have to say, may be a mistake. If he had extended FE into that mix, it would perhaps have been a more interesting and appealing prospect.

My final note of caution is on levelling-up funding. Although the Chancellor announced that round 2 would be happening, he was silent on round 3, and I am slightly concerned that it will get lost in the mix.

There are positives, however. Capital expenditure is maintained, R&D is maintained and the gigabit roll-out is maintained. All those are incredibly important. The shift towards nuclear and the backing for Sizewell C are incredibly important. As a Derbyshire MP, I hope that we will go further on small modular reactors. We as a country need to pursue the fantastic prospect from Rolls-Royce because it will play a huge part in our energy mix. We are incredibly lucky that 40% of our energy now comes from renewables, but we can go much further. Nuclear plays a huge role in that, and we need to continue banging that drum.

I will finish on a positive note: energy efficiency. We had a policy that came out as a stimulus package. It was far from effective, actually, and if I have a note of agreement with those on the Labour Front Bench, it is around energy efficiency and the fact that we need to do more. We need to reduce demand for energy and make sure that homes, particularly for those who are less well off, are better insulated. I have seen some of that on the ground. The social sector part of that particular scheme was effective—it was the private sector bit that was terrible—and I would like to see more done on that front.

In short, with some notes of caution, I think the Chancellor did a rather good job. Tackling inflation will be incredibly difficult, but it is absolutely the right thing to solve. Alongside that, I would add, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) said so elegantly, that growth and confidence are vital for the future of the economy, and if we do not have those in the mix as well, I do not know what we are doing here.

3.45 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): It will be of little surprise that I intend to speak against the autumn statement, because it unjustly places the burden on the ordinary people of the countries of the United Kingdom. At the weekend, I was at a performance of a show called “Kelty Clippie” by the Kingdom Theatre Company. That performance took me back to a time when our mining communities took pride in their work, when our yards built rigs, when Rosyth was a substantial naval base and local businesses were able to thrive.

While the discovery of North sea oil and gas promised an embarrassment of riches for Scotland, Gavin McCrone’s report that disclosed the fact was hidden by successive Labour and Tory Governments. Scotland’s economy and industry were subsequently dismantled. Oil and gas have kept the UK Treasury pumped full of cash, and Scotland’s industry has been decimated. I did not come here to dot the i’s and cross the t’s of Tory policy that has been rejected by the people of Scotland for all my life. I came here to argue Scotland’s case: the autumn statement places the burden on ordinary people. They already faced a cost of living crisis, but then we had the £30 billion cost of the incompetence of the former Prime Minister and Chancellor, who will now receive a stipend of more than £100,000 for blowing up the economy. That crisis is on top of 12 years of Tory austerity, and is not because of profligate public services. They are breaching the supposed core principles of free marketeers. Failure is supposed to self-regulate markets.

The public’s money has been used to bail out failing bankers. The public’s money is now bailing out failing energy companies, and the UK’s largest producer of—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, somebody keeps phoning me; I am going to switch it off. The UK’s largest producer of semiconductors was to be purchased by a Chinese company. That has been blocked by this Government. That is because it is an essential service, they say, and it cannot be foreign-owned, but many of the UK’s energy suppliers are foreign-owned. What is more essential a service than the provision of energy?

The autumn statement is not about fiscal responsibility; it is a frantic response to the utter incompetence of this Tory Government. There is one point on which I agreed with the Chancellor when he spoke—his slip of the tongue that this is the English Parliament. It certainly feels like it from my position. What place does Scotland have here? We have a smattering of Unionist MPs, but Scotland is shouted down from the Government Benches. Our people are ignored. Over the last nine months, £8 billion of North sea oil and gas revenue has flowed into His Majesty’s Treasury. The percentage share for Scotland was zero. The block grant gets tighter every year. The Scottish Government are pilloried. The Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition at last week’s PMQs spoke about the renewables revolution and investment to deliver jobs and prosperity, but who for? Not for Scotland. The profits still flow to His Majesty’s Treasury and to corporate interests.

Energy for 2.8 million homes is cabled directly from Scotland’s territorial waters to England. There are no jobs for Scotland. There are no supply chain jobs. The yards sit idle. There is a continued plundering of our resources, and it sincerely saddens me that the Scottish Government replicated UK policy with the ScotWind

licence, passing vast profits to corporate interests. A 25-year licence worth an estimated £350 billion was sold for a measly £700 million.

The autumn statement delivers nothing for Scotland. Scottish councils are losing out on levelling-up funds administered by Westminster. Despite the many risks of freeports for employment rights and protections, Scotland loses again. The Chancellor has failed to set out costed plans for how these freeports will operate, be funded and be essential to regeneration, job creation and trade with European and other overseas markets. This all shows that the empty promises of Brexit are exactly that—empty.

The Chancellor said that his priorities were energy, infrastructure and innovation, but Fife is losing out on all three. Where is the investment for direct ferry links from Rosyth to Europe, now that European motorways of the sea funding is no longer available? Where is the investment in renewables and the jobs bonanza we were promised to secure the future of the BiFab yards? Why are families across Fife and my constituency being plunged further and further into fuel poverty, forced to pay skyrocketing energy prices, extortionate standing charges and higher rates on prepayment meters or, sadly, forced into self-disconnection because they cannot afford to pay? There will be even less help from April next year.

One achievement of Tory policy over the last 12 years is the growth of food banks, and even they are under threat from this Tory Government. The Kirkcaldy food bank is facing immense costs because need has increased vastly. Its monthly costs used to be around £2,000, but they are now approaching £20,000, and the food bank may have to close. Where will people turn to then?

The Government should be ashamed of this statement, which places the burden of their failures on the backs of the people. It is time for Scotland to take the full powers of an independent country. Our vast resources must be put to work for the common good of the Scottish people.

3.53 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in support of this autumn statement. In the time available to me, I will talk about an issue that has come up a lot today, but I will talk about it in a very particular way to illustrate the problems we have with it. That issue is inflation.

Inflation is at the heart of our economic problem. Inflation is the reason why food prices are high. Inflation is the reason why energy prices are so difficult to manage. Inflation, as we have heard from many Members, is the core reason why the debt interest bill that the Government have to pay is now so high. We have heard a lot about the different global causes of this inflation, but it is worth making the point again that this inflation is happening in every single western country—it is happening in most countries in the world, not just western countries. We should never stop underlining that point. This is not about escaping political responsibility—I am not playing a party political game here—but we can deal with the problem only if we understand its true causes.

The first cause, as mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), is about central banks and the policy of quantitative easing, which pumped several trillion pounds into the

economy over the last 10 years. Regardless of people's view as to whether that was necessary at the beginning as we came out of the financial crisis, many people rightly ask whether, if we—not just globally, but the Bank of England—expand the money supply to such a degree, it is a shock that, at some point, when there is an exogenous factor such as the war in Ukraine, inflation appears to be structurally embedded and higher than it was before. The Bank of England and global central banks, such as the US Fed and the European Central Bank, need to examine their policies over the last 10 years that have contributed to the global rise in inflation.

The second global cause of inflation is what has been going on in China. Its zero covid policy means that its growth rate this year is 3.2% or 3.3%, while its growth target is 5.5%. China tends to hit its targets—at least officially—so that shows that it is not soaking up global demand in the way that it did, which is also having a big impact. At the same time, it hurts supply chains across the world, particularly this country's manufacturing businesses as well as others, which need China to be open.

Those problems have contributed to inflation, but I do not want to focus on them. I want to focus on the cost of energy, because that underpins many other things in our economy. Indeed, the difficulties that the pound sterling, the euro and many other currencies had, and still have, against the dollar in the last couple of months were in large part because of energy prices being priced in dollars, and the impact of that on the world economy.

We are trying to decarbonise our economy, as hon. Members on both sides of the House agree, but oil and gas are still hugely significant to absolutely everything in the economy. Structurally, demand for oil and gas from the developing world—not primarily China, but India and sub-Saharan Africa—is rocketing, because the people in those countries want to have what we have. They want to industrialise and make their lives better, and they need energy to do that. At the same time, we are seeing lower investment in new oil and gas by major energy companies. That is happening for myriad reasons, but principally because the messages that we have been sending around the necessary green investment have made shareholders demand higher returns for shareholders rather than those profits going into investment.

The long and short of it is that we do not have enough oil and gas and the demand for it is rising, so prices are going up. Although the war in Ukraine has hugely exacerbated and accelerated the difficulty, it is worth saying that the problems with energy have been building for a long time. Even when the war in Ukraine concludes, as we hope happens soon, prices will still be higher than we have been used to.

Every economic expansion in the world over the last 300 years was founded on not just innovation but cheap energy. We have to be honest as a House, as a country and as the Conservative party that all our hopes and dreams about what our economy should do—all the funds that we want to put into the NHS, all the infrastructure that we want to build, all the tax cuts that we want to give—are founded on having affordable energy for individuals and businesses.

What are we going to do about that? All hon. Members on both sides of the House agree that we need more renewable investment—more nuclear, more wind, more

[*Bim Afolami*]

solar. We will always talk about investing more in those things, so it is about not just the investment, but our ability to get it done. I am sure many Members will share my frustration at the gap between our intentions, whether through legislation or policy, on the investments that are made and the big numbers that we talk about and see, and the slow deliverability of that on the ground. In energy in particular, the amount of time it takes to get a nuclear power station off the ground is too long. The amount of time it takes even to get a wind farm and wind terminals off the ground is too long; in fact it is getting longer. On solar, we have problems with planning in that area as well.

Aaron Bell: I thank my hon. Friend for what he is saying. The Science and Technology Committee, on which I sit, is currently looking at our nuclear investments for the future. Is he aware that, for example, the number of documents submitted in planning for Sizewell C is over 4,000 compared with about 1,000 for Hinkley Point C and it is basically the same design? Is that not an example of what he is talking about?

Bim Afolami: It is, and I would love to speak much more about that point, but I do not have much time. I would just say that we must start to take seriously the issues of delivering much more renewable energy on our own soil, and of exploring oil and gas in the North sea to the maximum we can. A lot of the other economic debates we have are largely irrelevant in the context of that energy challenge.

We have heard a lot today about investment for public services. I remind all Members, particularly Opposition Members, that we cannot oppose measures for the growth of our economy, and we cannot always oppose investments or incentives for investment for successful businesses or individuals and, at the same time, say that we need more investment in our public services. We need to remember that the only money spent by the Government is the money that we generate as a private sector and private enterprise. That is why we need to tackle inflation, that is why the core of tackling inflation is dealing with the cost of energy and that is why I support this autumn statement.

4.2 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Let me be absolutely clear: the only thing this autumn statement achieves is further inequality, further injustice and further unfairness to our communities, and that is after 12 years of the devastation of our communities through a well-thought-out, well-planned ideological agenda.

In my constituency of Bradford East—let us deal with facts; Conservative Members want to talk about facts, so let us talk about them—50% of children are living in absolute poverty. Fifty per cent. of those may not even have a hot meal today. Many of those families will be using food banks—as the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) said, where they can be made available—in a tragic society in which food banks are now more dominant than fast food places. That is the stark reality.

What does this autumn statement do to alleviate the poverty in my constituency? What shall I tell the children in my constituency about what this autumn statement does for them? What does it do to make sure every child will get a hot meal today? What does it do to make sure that families—including working families—will not use food banks? Those are the questions that my constituents and those of hon. Members in this House will be asking us when we go back. It is fine playing ping-pong or flashy economics across the Chamber, but that is not the question we will be asked.

This statement is a missed opportunity, just like the last statement was, the statement before that and, tragically, the statements we have had over the last 12 years. I am astonished when I come to debates such as this and see Conservative Members—they have even done it today—using that defence, as though the last Labour Government 12 years ago are suddenly to blame for all the economic problems we face today. I remind hon. Members: they may be able to use that argument for the first, second or third year, but we are four general elections forward. We are on our fifth Prime Minister. We have changed God knows how many Chancellors. They cannot use that argument today. We have to move on, accept responsibility and place it where it lies.

The fact remains that the UK is the fifth largest economy in the world. Our country is the fifth richest on the planet, yet when we leave this House and its ivory towers, and go to my constituency and those of other hon. Members, we see a country that looks nothing like one of the richest. We see ambulances backed up queuing, children crammed into bursting classes, hospital wards overflowing into corridors, GP appointments that can never be booked, trains that do not run on time, buses that do not turn up, police officers that cannot attend crimes, social security that provides very little security, rivers that are literally sewers, and homes that are riddled with damp and mould. Those are not signs of the fifth richest country; they are signs of a country that is broken and has been broken for a long time—for 12 years.

We know where the blame for our broken country lies. It lies with the party in government that has squandered and misspent over a decade in power. It lies with the party that imposed cruel austerity on our public services. But I do not expect this Government to understand. After all, they are led by a Prime Minister who is not only the richest Member of Parliament, but one of the country's richest citizens. He is twice as rich as the King. He has never known hardship. He is supported by a Chancellor who has never been hard up or had to scrimp and save like my constituents, or choose between heating and eating like my constituents. He has never asked how he is going to get from one day to the next, as my constituents have.

If I come across as angry, perhaps it is because I am angry. I am enraged that over the past 12 years this Tory Government have robbed my constituents in Bradford of their futures, to line their own pockets and the pockets of their friends and donors. I am enraged by the fact that, despite the country falling down around their ears, with crumbling schools and hospitals, they still will not admit the carnage they have caused. Indeed, they sit there and they cheer.

Jonathan Gullis: As someone who probably speaks with the same sort of vim and vigour as he does, I always admire the passion of the hon. Gentleman in the

Chamber. He laid out a litany of issues across our country. Of course I am not in denial of those situations. Can he promise the House, and members of the public, that if Labour were in government, taxation on individuals—not the wealthiest, but average income householders—would not increase at all in any of Labour's fiscal policies to help to deliver on their fiscal plans? General taxation would not in any way increase—can he deliver that promise to the House right now?

Imran Hussain: The hon. Gentleman, who I normally have good banter with, tragically on this occasion illustrates the very point I make. His constituents expect him to scrutinise his own Government, who are not alleviating poverty even in his constituency. When he goes back to his constituency, I suggest he asks those questions of constituents and they will provide the answer to the question for him, which is this: it is his Government who for the past 12 years have made their lives a misery.

Neale Hanvey: The hon. Gentleman is making an outstanding contribution. Does he agree that gross greed and the deliberate exploitation of people lies at the heart of the fundamental problem we have in our society? We must talk about that, challenge it and eradicate it.

Imran Hussain: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Going back to my opening lines, the reality remains that what this statement does—perhaps the surest thing it achieves—is further inequality, injustice and unfairness.

Jonathan Gullis *rose*—

Imran Hussain: I will not give the hon. Gentleman time again. He asked a question and I gave him a perfectly good suggestion: to go and ask his constituents. He will find the answer there.

What is shocking is that Conservative Members sat there and cheered and applauded when the ex-Chancellor delivered the fiscal event that crashed our economy. They cheered, and people in Bradford and elsewhere across the country now face unaffordable mortgages. They cheered at soaring energy bills. They cheered at spiralling food costs and they cheered at mounting fuel prices. That disconnect with the rest of the country, that incapability to understand the challenges that people in Bradford and elsewhere face, is why this autumn statement delivered next to nothing for my constituents and why no Tory Budget ever will.

After 12 years of failure, carnage and chaos, it is even more apparent than ever that the Tory Government have run out of ideas and run out of road. They have no mandate from the country and no support from the public. Instead of presenting this watered-down Budget that fails to properly address any of the challenges and hardships that people in Bradford face, the Government should have done the right thing—the principled thing—and called for a general election. But the reason Conservative Members—including the Prime Minister—will not call for a general election is that they know their fate. They know that, in a general election, the British people will repay them for the hardship, chaos and absolute devastation that they have brought to our communities. Let me assure them again: when a general election is called, the British people will pay them back with interest at the ballot box.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I think that Madam Deputy Speaker suggested eight minutes for speeches. We have had some slippage on that with a few speakers. So could people try to stick to that figure? You will do that, won't you, Mr Bell?

4.12 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), although I utterly reject his thesis and characterisation of the response of those on the Government Benches; that is not appropriate in respect of this statement or the previous one. These are undoubtedly difficult times and they require tough decisions. That is what we saw from the Chancellor last week. The priority is to restore economic stability and sound money and, most of all, to tackle inflation.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) for talking about inflation, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). As my hon. Friend said, the inflation that we are experiencing, which is happening everywhere, is the most pernicious thing that we have to tackle right now. We have not had inflation at this level since I was in short trousers. The priority with inflation is to get on top of it quickly. If we allow it to persist, it will make everyone poorer again and again—it erodes people's savings and the value of people's salaries, which affects the cost of living—so we must tackle it. The measures that the Chancellor set out last week do that.

At the same time as tackling inflation, the Government are protecting people from inflation through the energy price guarantee—it is very expensive, which is another reason why we will need to make savings elsewhere—and maintaining the triple lock. A number of my constituents wrote to me about that—I have a considerably above-average number of pensioners in Newcastle-under-Lyme and had a lot of correspondence about it. I assured them that I would go to the Chancellor and fight for them. I am pleased that he listened to me and like-minded colleagues and that we will put up the state pension by inflation. We will also put up pension credit by inflation in the new year and all benefits, including in-work benefits.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) that we need to restore more conditionality. In a world where we have quite close to full employment at the moment—I accept that, as the OBR said, there may be some increase in unemployment—we need to encourage those who can take on more hours or go back into the labour market to do so. We are also being fair in protecting people from inflation through our biggest ever increase in the national living wage, which is now up to £10.42 an hour for those over 23—a boost of over £1,600 to annual earnings.

It is not just about stability; it is also about credibility and being honest with people, as the Exchequer Secretary said when opening the debate. It is about being honest and credible not only with the markets, but with the country. If we are to be honest and credible in this Chamber, we should acknowledge that mistakes were made in the mini-Budget. I thought the decision on the 45p tax rate was a mistake, and I communicated that privately to the Chancellor. That decision was reversed

[Aaron Bell]

and now, contrary to what we have heard from some, we are asking those with the broadest shoulders to bear the burden of taxation and lowered the 45p rate threshold to £125,000. Overall, this statement is a mixture of spending restraint and tax rises, but we are making sure that the burden falls on those who are most able to afford it—completely contrary to what Opposition Members have said today.

The Opposition do not seem to have a plan of their own. We kept being promised one today by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), but there never seemed to be one. The shadow Chancellor herself did not offer anything in her rather over-the-top response to the Chancellor's statement last week. Again and again, people have brought up the last 12 years, but I repeat the point I made in an intervention: we inherited a £149 billion deficit and we worked hard to reduce it, repeatedly opposed by the Opposition. The national debt has increased because borrowing each year does that.

The Opposition like to blame global financial circumstances for situation—they like to say it was made in America—but the truth is that, as the International Monetary Fund said, by 2007 we were running the biggest structural deficit of any country in the G7. The idea that we should put the Labour party back in charge of another difficult situation is for the birds.

We are genuinely dealing with a situation largely caused by unprecedented external economic shocks. The biggest of those shocks was covid—a once-in-100-years event. That cost £400 billion—money we ultimately have to pay back, and as interest rates on Government debt rise, repaying those debts becomes more burdensome. I believe that £400 billion was money well spent: it saved jobs, it saved businesses and it saved lives. We should all be proud of what we did through covid, but we have to face the fact that there will be a reckoning.

The same is true of the energy shock. We have the first war in Europe for 75 years, and a once-in-50-years energy shock has followed. I think we can be proud of our response, both abroad in our support for the Ukrainians, in materiel and training for their armed forces and diplomatic support for Volodymyr Zelensky, and at home in shielding people, households and businesses from that shock, but it is expensive. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) said, that costs an extra £150 billion; the Government are bearing a third of the cost, but it is a cost for everybody to bear, equivalent to an extra NHS. We need to find ways to pay for that.

Speaking of the NHS, the Chancellor—as befits a former Health Secretary and a former Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee—has protected our NHS in these difficult times, giving an extra £7.7 billion over the next two years to tackle precisely the issues we have heard about today, which I recognise in my own constituency. It is difficult for ambulances to get into hospitals because hospitals are operating beyond capacity, and it is difficult to get people out of hospital and into social care.

The ABCD plan proposed in the summer is the right approach; we need to tackle the backlog and get people seeing their GPs again. Putting extra money into the health service, even in these difficult economic times, is

the right thing to do, as is the £4 billion we are putting into schools. We are protecting the budgets that matter the most to our constituents in places such as Newcastle, and no doubt Bradford East as well. The money will put real-terms per pupil funding back up to above 2010 levels—more than the Labour party has pledged to give schools.

We are also protecting the commitments we made during the general election to level up. Newcastle-under-Lyme has secured £34 million through the future high streets fund and the towns fund. Speaking of high streets, which are critical in constituencies such as mine, the business rates package we have offered—£14 billion over the next five years—and the long overdue revaluation, which will make a huge difference to business rates in the centre of Newcastle-under-Lyme, are extremely welcome, as is the new relief for retail, hospitality and leisure being extended 50% next year and 75% the year after. That will make a real difference to the viability of existing shops in my town centre and the viability of the new shops that people open.

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Gentleman for setting out clearly a number of the financial issues that have been impacting the cost of living and need to be addressed. Does he agree that, in addition, we need to look at decentralised finance? With the collapse of FTX, and the fact that almost 10% of the UK population have some kind of engagement with the cryptocurrency markets, we need to ensure that consumer protection is at the forefront of what we are doing, have a deeper look at regulation and move that forward at speed.

Aaron Bell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising cryptocurrency, FTX and so on. She may know that I recently held a Westminster Hall debate on the pernicious reach of cryptocurrency into sport, and that one of her SNP colleagues held a separate debate on it. The Treasury needs to listen carefully to the issues being raised around cryptocurrency, and particularly the damage it is doing to young men, who are very susceptible to “get rich quick” schemes.

I am pleased that the Government resisted the temptation to cut long-term capital budgets, such as Sizewell C, the levelling-up fund and our investment in R&D, which is where we will get growth from in the future.

To conclude, these are difficult times, but I think we are taking action that is appropriate and fair. We are making sure that those with the broadest shoulders who can bear the burden do so. We are splitting the cost of covid and the energy price shock between tax rises and spending restraint. The OBR itself expects our package to reduce peak inflation and peak unemployment, and the Bank of England now expects lower inflation and lower peak interest rates, which will look after mortgage holders. All the while, we are looking after the NHS and our schools, as our constituents expect us to do. I have every confidence in the Chancellor and his statement, and in our ability to steer the economy through these troubled times.

4.21 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What a fascinating 60 days it has been. We were told 60 days ago by hon. Members on the Government Benches that they welcomed the fiscal event and statement from the

former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng). In fact, as I recall, 60 days ago they were shouting, “More!” They then demanded that the Scottish Parliament follow suit and pass on the tax cuts they were introducing—so risible, it is incredible. And now, 60 days later, they welcome this U-turn and a completely different statement.

I want to speak first on whether this autumn statement benefits the wealthy or the poorest. The key test of that is found in two books. The OBR questioned the Government’s DWP and HMRC compliance measures that raise £2.8 billion a year by 2027-28. The Green Book tells us that of that £2.8 billion, £2.2 billion will be chasing social security fraud and error. By my sums, that means £0.6 billion is being used to chase tax avoidance and evasion. What a timid way of dealing with tax avoidance and evasion. The Tax Justice Network and the Public and Commercial Services Union estimate tax avoidance and evasion to be worth £70 billion, so the Government are seeking to recoup less than one hundredth of that tax avoidance and evasion—you really could not make it up. What message is it sending to the tax avoiders and evaders that the Government will be spending only so much and seem to be able to recoup so little?

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is the oil giants, such as Shell and BP, and the FTSE 100 bosses, recording record profits and pay rises, who should be shouldering the burden of the Chancellor’s austerity budget, not our constituents who are struggling to make ends meet in a cost of living crisis?

Chris Stephens: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, because we should be looking at an excess profits tax across the board. It is quite right to mention the oil and gas companies, but they are not the only ones who benefited from the pandemic. We now seem to be being told by the Government that tax avoidance and evasion somehow disappeared during the pandemic. That is the only conclusion we can reach when we look at the figures in these documents.

In addition, the Government seem to be making no attempt to discuss how we tackle energy prices. People have a very real perception that the regulators are on the side of the energy companies, not the consumers. That is exactly what the people on the streets believe when they talk about energy. We should start giving the regulators more teeth and encourage them to use their powers to go after the energy companies that are making excess profits, as well as to bring prices down for consumers, because that has to happen.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point about the absolutely crushing effect that energy costs are having on families and communities. Does he agree that off-gas grid supplies should be regulated as well? For too long they have been ignored, and people are paying substantially more to heat their homes than people on the gas grid do.

Chris Stephens: I agree, and my hon. Friend made powerful points earlier about costs, as did the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan). Poverty is a

real issue across the UK—it is not just an urban, but a rural issue—and it affects all the communities across these islands.

As much as I welcome the fact that benefits were uprated in line with inflation, it has always been regarded as a political fact that that should happen anyway, so we should not give the Government any kudos just for following what should take place. However, as the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) rightly argued, food inflation has gone up by 16%, and we are seeing a rise in the use of food banks and affordable food projects, which are the next level above food banks. Pantries and larders are opening up in many of our communities to help people move away from food banks, and I am involved in many such projects in Glasgow South West.

Drew Hendry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Stephens: I will in a second, but I want to talk about poverty and the Department for Work and Pensions—I am on the Work and Pensions Committee.

The DWP is closing offices and laying off its workers. Incredibly, the Department that is responsible for employment and social security is saying to its workforce, “You are no longer required,” because it is closing offices. That position is absolutely risible, and it is made even more risible by its refusal of home working for people who are under threat of redundancy. One thing that did work during the pandemic was home working; it helped people to get into the workplace. As we heard in my exchange with the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), when we encourage home working, we encourage people into paid employment.

It seems daft that Government Departments are telling their workforce, “Come into the office, come into these workplaces, but you can’t work from home.” The Government have to show a bit more creativity if they are serious about dealing with long-term unemployment, turning around people’s lives and getting them into work. It seems completely contradictory for them to say to their workforce, “You cannae work from home.” The position they find themselves in is completely and utterly risible.

I hope that the Minister will answer this question: of the 6,000 additional employees that the state is going to employ, what will the ratio be between the DWP and HMRC? I will make an educated guess: the overwhelming majority will end up in the DWP chasing social security fraud and error, not in HMRC tackling tax avoidance and evasion.

Finally, there was nothing in the statement about public sector pay policy. So many workers have taken the view that they have no alternative other than to withdraw their labour because of the low pay offers that they get from employers, including many in the public sector. The overwhelming majority of civil servants are not covered by pay review bodies, yet we do not know the Government’s policy on public sector pay. Public sector workers spend that money in the economy and there could be an economic boost if we give public sector workers the pay rise that they deserve. I hope that we will get an answer to that, because public sector workers deserve better than to be treated as the Government are treating them.

4.29 pm

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): Stability, growth and public services: those were the three objectives that the Chancellor set himself in preparing his statement. Overall, in the face of enormous global challenges, he can be proud of how the statement has been received by the markets and by the Office for Budget Responsibility, which estimated, after considering it, that inflation would fall by 30% next year.

I understand the attraction for the Opposition of attributing the current economic situation to the Conservative Government. I repeat what I said on the Floor of the House last week: mistakes were made in the mini-Budget. However, Opposition Front Benchers must get to grips with the fact that those mistakes were quickly corrected. Almost none of the measures that were controversial were ever implemented.

The Opposition will have to say soon why this Government are the cause of the current crisis, when every expert—from the Bank of England to the Office for Budget Responsibility to the market—says otherwise. I gently draw the Opposition's attention to the fact that since the autumn statement was published, sterling has continued on its upward trajectory back to its March rate, gilt yields have fallen 15% from their peak after the mini-Budget, and the Chancellor's decisive action has stabilised the mortgage market.

The Opposition do not have to take my word for it. I invite them to consider the language used by the Governor of the Bank of England when he appeared before the Treasury Committee last week. The Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), asked:

“on this important question of mortgages, because it matters so much to our constituents...how much of the increase that you see in the mortgage market today has come from that independent decision by the Bank of England to tighten monetary policy and how much has been due to the disruption to the gilt market that we saw in September and early October?”

The Governor answered:

“I think the September-October thing was obviously a short-lived thing...It is pretty much on the way to being gone. That was a thing that ran from...September through to the middle of October.”

With respect, if the Opposition are going to keep parroting the line that this was a crisis made in Downing Street, it is incumbent on them to say why the Governor of the Bank of England is incorrect. It is also incumbent on them to explain why, despite everything, the Conservative party is still ahead on British trust in our ability to manage the economy.

I want to touch on three important points that came out of the autumn statement. The first relates to the cost of living. I said last week that I was pleased to see the triple lock protected and benefits uprated, costly though that has been, because inflation has a disproportionate impact on those on the lowest incomes. I have to align myself with the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling): it is right that the uprating is balanced by a review of the workforce, because since the pandemic began there has been a 25% increase in the number of people out of work by reason of long-term sickness. It is fair that that receives some serious scrutiny from the Department for Work and Pensions. I also welcome the increase in the national living wage to more than £10 an

hour: the case for a minimum wage above £10 an hour has been quite strong for some time, but it is now overwhelming.

I hope that when the Chancellor returns to the House in the spring, he will say something about childcare. I have been working on the issue across the parties, particularly with Conservative colleagues, and with think-tanks and campaign groups; only last week I met the Women's Budget Group and Pregnant Then Screwed. One of the most important takeaways is that, whatever cuts households make to their discretionary spending on leisure, holidays or other luxuries, one area that they are not cutting is childcare. I diverge slightly from the Opposition on this point, because I think some of the solutions are not monetary and we are not exploring all the opportunities with childminders, who offer an affordable and flexible form of childcare. I hope that the Government are thinking about the issue seriously. I think they are. I would rather they came back with a comprehensive package than with something piecemeal; I hope that that will come soon.

I also want to touch on the commitment to research and development that was made for the most dynamic sectors of our economy. Science, technology, life sciences and green industries all got a mention in the autumn statement, and all of them thrive in west Berkshire, including Stryker medical technology, Edwards Lifesciences, Vodafone, Roc Technologies, Fuel Cell Systems and Anesco. They are the great innovators of west Berkshire and they employ more than 5,000 people in my constituency alone.

The decision to protect the £20 billion R&D budget is about more than just meeting a manifesto commitment; it speaks to our ambition for those sectors, our direction of travel as a nation and our faith in the private sector to really drive growth. It also dovetails with the £800 million commitment that the Government have already made to supporting new frontiers through the Advanced Research and Invention Agency, which remains one of the most exciting innovations since I arrived in Parliament. It remains the case, though, that investment budgets are still stubbornly underused, and I hope that the Government will go further in this area and continue to expand the qualifying criteria of R&D for tax credit purposes, because there are real opportunities for our economy if we can do that.

4.35 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this final debate on the Chancellor's autumn statement and I would like to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) for her fantastic response to the statement last Thursday. Let us not forget that this Tory economic crisis was made in Downing Street and that after 12 long years of their failure, dithering, delay and fighting for the privileged few, we are being held back by a party that does not care about people in the real world.

This statement has done nothing to help the really hard-pressed communities in Newport West that sent me here. Yet again, the Tories have loaded the cost of their incompetence on to working people in Newport West and across the country. My constituent Jenny Cloete shared her story with me, and she said this:

“My family is struggling to put food on the table, and I work full time. I struggle with everyday living costs and I’m not the lowest paid. I’m scared to wake up, scared to think past tomorrow. Scared for what’s to come. Please stand up for those of us with no voice.”

Jenny is not alone. There are millions across the country who share those worries and fears.

There were two tests for the Government in the autumn statement: would they make fairer choices, and would they grow the economy? They have failed them both, but they have chosen to fail. Fairer choices could have been made, but they will now have to be made by the next Labour Government instead. Not only did the Conservatives in government fail to make the right choices but they are seemingly unable to put forward a serious plan for growth. Only Labour has a plan to escape the Tory doom loop and get our economy firing on all cylinders. I want to pay tribute to my constituents Shaun and Julie from Bassaleg post office in Newport West, who made it clear in a recent email to me that things are beyond tough. They said:

“We are working long hours, 6 days a week with no breaks and are working for less than the minimum wage.”

So much for the Tory plan to get everyone into work. Shaun and Julie are both full-time workers, but they still cannot make ends meet.

In this statement, the Tories introduced new stealth tax rises, turning the screws on working people with 24 Tory tax rises during this Parliament and a rise in the tax burden to its highest in 70 years. Worse, the Office for Budget Responsibility has said that living standards are going to be worse at the end of this Parliament than at the start, with the biggest fall on record. That is a shocking indictment of Conservative party rule in Westminster, yet we now see Tory MPs doubling down on the new Prime Minister’s high-tax, low-growth model. We have been there before, and it does not work. This is why our growth is forecast to be the lowest in the G7 and the OECD over the next two years. This is what we get with Tories in government.

I am proud that Labour has a plan. Our country needs a serious plan for growth to escape the doom loop of Conservative economic mismanagement. That is why we will scrap business rates and replace them with a fairer system that is fit for the digital economy and ensures that our businesses are not at a disadvantage. That is why we have a modern industrial strategy to support the sectors of the future, and an active working partnership with business. We will support our entrepreneurs, and our start-up review will help to make Britain the best place to start and grow a new business, creating jobs and strengthening communities. Our green prosperity plan will create good jobs across the country. From the plumbers and builders needed to insulate homes to the engineers and operators for wind and other renewables, we will make Britain a world leader in the industries of the future and ensure that people in Newport West and across the UK have the skills to benefit from these opportunities.

4.39 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): The Chancellor and the Prime Minister took the tough decisions necessary in the autumn statement to restore economic stability and tackle inflation. The UK Government understand that inflation makes everyone poorer, which is why it is

right that their No. 1 priority is to grip inflation. Like many countries around the world, as has been mentioned many times in this debate, the UK is facing profound economic challenges from the illegal invasion of Ukraine and the covid pandemic.

We spent more than £400 billion supporting 14.5 million jobs during the pandemic. It is right that we start to pay it back now, rather than leaving it for future generations to pay the price. I am very pleased, like many Conservative Members and, I suspect, many Opposition Members, that the Government are standing by the most vulnerable, by uprating benefits in line with inflation and keeping the pensions triple lock. Those decisions are of great importance to my constituents in Clwyd South, as they have said to me in person and in many items of correspondence.

Much as I respect many Opposition Members, particularly the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), whom it is a pleasure to follow, they have given us precious little evidence of their alternative policies. My suspicion is that, if they are honest, they probably agree with most of the autumn statement.

A key point in this debate is that Labour’s plans, as they stand, would lead to an annual fiscal black hole of £148 billion, which equates to £5,474 per household. Labour has racked up £160 billion of annual spending commitments and only £11.2 billion of annual revenue increases across a five-year Parliament. I accept that the Opposition are reluctant to set out detailed spending and taxation policies at this stage in the electoral cycle, but it is incumbent on SNP, Labour or Liberal Democrat Members to say what they would do, in clear and evidenced terms, as an alternative to the Government’s policies.

Importantly, this Government’s tough decisions allow us to increase spending on schools and the NHS. We are providing £4 billion of additional funding to schools and £7.7 billion of additional funding to the NHS and social care sector over the next two years.

The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) claims that Labour would run everything a lot better, particularly the NHS, and I urge her to look at what is happening in Labour-run Wales. In the Welsh NHS, one in four people is on a waiting list of one type or another, whereas the figure in England is one in eight. I am a Member of Parliament for a north Wales constituency, and it is exceptionally difficult for my constituents to have a health service with one of the lowest levels of performance in the whole UK. If that is the shape of what Labour promises across the UK, it needs to go back to the Welsh Government to say that the Welsh health service should be run a lot better for my constituents and for the people of Wales.

I am also very pleased that defence spending will continue to exceed 2% of GDP, which is critical when we are supplying huge support to the Ukrainian people. I pay tribute to the leaders of my party who, over a number of years, have put the defence of this country, and the support of allies such as Ukraine, front and centre of their policies.

I am also pleased by the Government’s fair approach to taxation, which shields small businesses from tax rises and maintains the lowest headline rate of corporation tax in the G7, after it has risen to 25%. Further reforms to employer national insurance contributions have been

[Simon Baynes]

announced, but small businesses will be protected from these increases through the small profits rate and employment allowance. Again, that is crucial to my constituency, which has a strong sector of small and medium-sized businesses. I am delighted that the Government are protecting their prospects and all that they provide for their communities in employment and gainful work, as that is also crucial.

Windfall taxes on energy companies have been much discussed, but those have also been extended and increased. That is a crucial part of the autumn statement. It is only fair that companies that have made genuine windfall profits as a result of the war in Ukraine make an additional contribution to pay for the support we have outlined. I think everyone accepts that the energy price guarantee is crucial, and the Government have announced more than £12 billion of additional targeted support to help the most vulnerable households. That is at the heart of this statement and the compassion contained in it. It is right that the Government are continuing to provide this year's cost of living payments. Next year, we will provide extra one-off payments of £900 for the 8 million households on means-tested benefits, £300 for pensioners, £150 for disability benefit recipients, and through the energy price guarantee the average household will save a further £500, to help with their energy bills.

The difficult but necessary decisions that have been taken elsewhere mean that it is welcome that we are able to protect the pensions triple lock in full and to uprate benefits in line with inflation. Those were two crucial things that many Members from across the whole House were keen to see included in the autumn statement and they have been fully honoured, and that is of critical importance to my constituents and to people across the country. As has been mentioned, it is welcome, including for my constituents, that the Government are increasing the national living wage to provide £1,600 extra per annum to 2 million low-paid workers. From 1 April 2023, the national living wage will increase by 9.7%, to £10.42 an hour for workers aged 23 and over. As a representative of this Government, I am proud of that.

Time is marching on, so let me say finally that of particular importance in my constituency is the continuation of the levelling-up fund, as that is a crucial help to places such as Clwyd South. We were fortunate enough to be granted a £13.3 million levelling-up fund bid, which is going to transform many parts of the Dee valley in my constituency, but I want other constituencies to benefit across the whole UK, whether they are represented by Conservatives or by Opposition Members. This must be protected and I am delighted that the £1.7 billion levelling-up fund has been protected. Round 2 of the bids will continue as planned, and at already announced funding levels. That means that at least £1.7 billion-worth of projects will be announced shortly.

In conclusion, the autumn statement delivers on stability, growth and the protection of public services, in a skilful and compassionate way. Therefore, it commands my full support.

4.48 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Although the autumn statement was rooted in economic reality after the last Budget tanked the economy, the £30 billion of spending

cuts and £25 billion of tax rises means my constituents are now paying for the mistakes of 12 years of Tory economic mismanagement. The Chancellor was at pains to blame our terrible financial situation on global factors, but he refused to acknowledge the permanent damage that the Government's mismanagement of the economy has caused through a decade of anaemic growth, September's disastrous Budget and their disastrous Brexit. Why else is the UK the only country in the G7 whose economy has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels and is not forecast to do so until around 2025?

Very difficult times now lie ahead, particularly for mortgage payers. The OBR said that rising interest rates will mean that mortgage rates are going to jump, and house prices will fall by 9% by October 2024. We were told that we would have a high wage, lower tax economy, but what we have is the highest tax burden since we finished paying for world war two and a tax package that will cost around £4,000 a year extra per family.

Jonathan Gullis: I have tried to ask this question of a few other Opposition MPs, so I will try again with the hon. Gentleman, who I know is a very good man. Obviously, he is saying that the tax burden is the highest that it has been in a long time, and I am certainly uncomfortable with that. Can he assure me and promise this House and people across our country that, if Labour were in government, there would be no further increase in the tax burden for those, not in the wealthiest bracket, but in the 20p bracket?

Mohammad Yasin: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) said to him, he should go back to his constituents in Stoke-on-Trent and they will answer his question. I shall carry on.

As I was saying, we could not be any further away from the promised sunlit uplands. I am pleased that the Government have finally listened to Labour on the windfall tax and that the new Prime Minister and Chancellor also agreed with Labour on protecting the triple lock on pensions. But where is the wage increase for public sector workers? Those workers are the key to fixing the crisis in the NHS and in our public services and to growing the economy with a healthy workforce, which is desperately needed to get the country back on its feet. The Government are asking for wage restraint while the lifting of the cap on bankers' bonuses and the non-dom status remain.

Where is the plan for social care? Three years ago, the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), pledged to

"fix the crisis in social care once and for all."

I asked the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities yesterday whether he agreed with the former Prime Minister when he said that he had fixed the social care crisis. I did not see him agreeing with the former Prime Minister.

The Chancellor has kicked the can down the road for at least another two years, and, while the extra £3.3 billion funding for the NHS is an important recognition that the health service is struggling to meet demand and keep patients safe, the Health Foundation charity has found that funding will increase only by 1.2% in real terms over the next two years.

I have been asking for clarity on the future of East-West Rail for well over a year now. The Government's shambolic handling of the project is causing a lot of distress to my constituents in Bedford whose lives have been in limbo since their homes came under threat of demolition in 2020. We urgently need to see the massively delayed consultation response and route announcement. I urge the Government to publish the business case before they proceed with full consideration of the environmental impacts. No new rail infrastructure should be built if it is not compatible with our net zero targets.

In the end, this was a Budget to calm the financial markets after the Government blew a credibility hole in the economy. While the most vulnerable may have been given some support to get through the next few years, the vast majority of us have very little protection. Few have savings to get them through the crisis. Many low-to-middle income earners cannot afford to pay for the Government's mess. Austerity is a political choice. It was the wrong choice before, and it is the wrong choice now.

4.53 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): There were things in the autumn statement that Conservative Members would rather not have to do, not least in regard to taxes, but we were always going to have to do some difficult things as a result of having spent more than £400 billion protecting jobs and livelihoods during the pandemic and as a result of Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the consequent impact on energy, food, support and so on. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out, it is right that we are tackling inflation, which, as some Conservative Members have said, hurts the poorest more. It is right that we do not leave this for our children and grandchildren to pay. It is also absolutely right that we ensure, in general, that those with the broadest shoulders pay the most. When we talk about our record on the economy on the Conservative side it is worth remembering, which has not been said very much today, that we have had near record low unemployment—the lowest in nearly 50 years—and for the first time on record we have had more jobs available than people to fill them.

As much as there were difficult things in this statement, there was also a series of measures that I welcome. My constituency is home to Harwell Science and Innovation Campus and Milton Park, where some of the best, most advanced science and technology in this country goes on. They are centres of investment for great companies all over the world. What the Government have set out in relation to research and development—the biggest increase in spending in cash terms over a spending review period—is very welcome. My constituency is also home to the Satellite Applications Catapult, so the increased funding for those nine Catapults all over the country is likewise welcome.

Of course I welcome the additional money for health and education, particularly for education and schools. The IFS has said that that additional money will cover the expected increase in costs between now and 2024. I welcome that support for education, partly because my background was working with schools and running charities for disadvantaged young people, but also because it is key to our future. We have talked about skills and the need to increase productivity and our knowledge base, and that is how we will do it.

As a broader point—not for this debate, but something we need to consider—I do not personally think the balance between the increase in health spending in recent decades and the increase in education spending is right. The increase in health has far outstripped the amount that Governments on both sides have given to education. There are understandable reasons for that, and the two areas are not the same, but we need to think about that balance. Health and education are inextricably linked and we should have more money going into education over time than we have seen in recent decades.

The other basket of measures that I support is about protecting the most vulnerable and the lowest paid. The increase in the national living wage, which takes us to £10.42 an hour, just shy of the manifesto commitment to increase it to £10.50 by 2024, is a much-needed pay boost for people at a time of difficult economic circumstances. I welcome the commitment on the triple lock, which means the increase in the basic state pension will be the biggest it has ever had. Already in 2021 it was at the highest rate in relation to earnings for 34 years; now it will be even higher.

I also welcome the uprating of benefits. There are people outside this House who suggest that people on benefits are all too lazy to work, but if we look at the people who are on benefits, we see that many of them are in work and cannot get enough hours or cannot earn enough in wages from the job they have; some have children who are under two whom they have to look after; and some may be severely disabled and simply unable to work.

Of course, if there are people who could work and are refusing to do so, we have to do something to ensure that they do work. It is right that the Government are conducting a review into the people who have left the labour market since the pandemic, because we have to understand, given that they were working, why they are not doing so now. We know that part of the reason is about mental health, so let us get to the bottom of that and support those people into work. However, until we do that, the overwhelming majority of people who are on benefits are not able to increase their incomes, so it is right that we support them through the uprating of benefits.

Then we turn to the Labour party. This Government have made a series of difficult decisions, but what of the Labour party? We talk about this Government's 12 years in power, but it is 17 years since the Labour party won a general election, and the last Labour leader to win one, Tony Blair, was fond of quoting:

"To govern is to choose."

So what difficult choices is the Labour party proposing as part of its plan? The Government have made quite a number of difficult choices; which ones does the Labour party want to make? It seems to be in favour of every spending commitment that the Government make, against every spending reduction, and against every tax increase—unless it has the word "windfall" in front of it. If we went outside now, stopped members of the public and asked, "What do you think about Labour's plan for the economy?", they would say, "What plan?"

That is important because, while this Government makes difficult decisions—some of which members of public will not like—the Labour party is not making

[David Johnston]

any. I listened to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who said that she wanted to put VAT on private school fees, raising £1.7 billion; end non-dom status, which she said would raise another £3 billion; and raise another £10 billion through a windfall tax, so we are looking at about £15 billion. The package that we are talking about is £55 billion. Where is the rest of the money coming from? Today's Labour party, unlike Labour parties of before, wants to govern without having to choose. The British public will decide what they think of that.

5 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): For all the talk of bringing back “compassionate conservatism”—an oxymoron—the British people have been left with more of the same: a Government whose priorities are so skewed that, after 12 years, they continue to reaffirm their unwavering commitment to looking after those at the top to the detriment of everybody else. Last week, there were fairer choices to be made; there were better choices to be made; and, frankly, there were choices that would have protected all our people against an economic onslaught that the Government have played no small part in making.

Call me naive, but I had assumed that the first rule of politics was to make life easier for people, helping them get on in life so that they can provide for their loved ones and families. The OBR is predicting that, on the Government's watch, my Liverpool, Wavertree constituents will endure a 7% hit to their household income over the next two years—that is unprecedented in modern times. I know that the Government like to deflect the blame entirely on to the situation in eastern Europe, which is undoubtedly playing its part, but the last time I checked, the Conservative party has been in power since 2010, and it should be a mark of deep shame for Conservative Members that real wages are lower than when they entered power.

Twelve years of wage stagnation, low growth and a failed austerity programme have left our towns and cities crying out for investment and support. Communities are now on the brink and poverty is rife, while those on moderate incomes also face money anxieties that they may never have experienced before. People who do all the hours God sends—the nurse, the self-employed worker at a start-up, the pub owner, the call centre worker—now all face a bleak future because of the choices this Government have made during their time in office.

The Conservative party should have its own feature on the BBC show “Rogue Traders”. Twelve years and six Chancellors ago by my count, the former Chancellor promised to fix the roof when the sun was shining. Well, they did not fix the roof when the sun was shining, nor when it was raining. Now, the hailstones are raining down and millions of people have awoken to the con. The British people have been ripped off and left with a bill for unfinished work—a botched job—and still the company is unwilling to take any responsibility. It does not matter whether it was David the joiner, Theresa the labourer, Boris the apprentice or Liz the plasterer; the whole company is responsible, and the sooner they are replaced with an organisation that can do the job, the

better. In all seriousness, the Conservative party cannot pride itself on economic competency when it represents, in every facet, the precise opposite.

The human cost is grave. The people I represent cannot endure more of the same. Last week's autumn statement reaffirmed more of the same at a time when our people deserve better.

5.4 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): This has been a tough autumn statement—tougher than many of us would have liked—but it has protected the most vulnerable through the uprating of benefits; continued the welcome reforms needed, such as on business rates to support our high streets; shored up financial stability and sustainability; renewed the focus on growth, including through business capital investment; honoured the triple lock for pensioners; and protected those public services that matter most, such as our NHS and schools, all while dealing with the global economic challenges caused by the pandemic and Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

The triple lock is incredibly welcome. Pensioners need that support now, but it will be important to look at how it can be sustained and what it could mean for the future retirement age. We will also have to do more for working and younger generations. It is particularly welcome that we are increasing the national living wage by the largest amount ever. Younger people are crying out for the chance to own their own home, to earn a good wage and to get into a high-skilled job, particularly people in Stoke-on-Trent, and these issues should be the main focus of our levelling-up agenda.

We have been incredibly grateful in Stoke-on-Trent for the support from the Government, particularly the £56 million from the levelling-up fund, which is more than any other part of the country and is going into developing brownfield sites across Stoke-on-Trent that have been derelict for many decades in many cases, such as the Tams factory in Longton in my constituency, which will be developed and getting under way shortly. That money is also going into extra care facilities for elderly people, which are very much needed in the local area and will make a huge difference to that former pottery factory.

In particular, we need to unlock the ability to build more homes. There are plenty of brownfield sites in Stoke-on-Trent where they can be built alongside those cutting-edge technologies and advanced manufacturing jobs that we want to grow further, but we need Government support to push on with the planning reforms and investment in mitigating the costs of decontaminating those brownfield sites, including through an investment zone for Stoke-on-Trent. That could focus on ceramics or the advanced manufacturing industries, which we obviously excel at in Stoke-on-Trent. It could also focus on digital and games design, which has a growing cluster in north Staffordshire, and particularly in Stoke-on-Trent.

We have excellent universities in Keele University and Staffordshire University, which has the largest number of gaming students in the country. There is an excellent opportunity to develop that further, and we are installing gigabit broadband across Stoke-on-Trent. There is huge potential and huge opportunity to grow these fast-growing sectors. It is worth mentioning that the growth in gaming was more than all other media put together in the last

year, which is phenomenal. We need to take more advantage of those sectors and that sort of economic growth across the UK.

We are incredibly proud in Stoke-on-Trent of making things, and our creative expertise in manufacturing ceramics is world-renowned. Indeed, the Potteries is one of the world's first and leading industrial clusters and is ideal for refocused investment zones. Sadly, under the previous Labour Government, huge world-famous brands in the Potteries were swept aside by the credit bust and boom. Since 2010, the industry has revived significantly, and sector gross value added has doubled in real terms. The permanent investment allowance of £1 million is certainly incredibly welcome.

Ceramics, however, is a heavily energy-intensive industry, and necessarily so to fire products at extreme heat. That has made the industry one of the most vulnerable to the huge swings in world energy prices. It is worth remembering that our domestic ceramics industry has one of the lowest carbon footprints of anywhere in the world. If we lose it, production and our environmental responsibilities will be offshored, shutting down a key national industry. Therefore, for both economic and environmental reasons, I urge the Treasury to engage with the ceramics industry, which is 97% made up of SMEs and therefore, too often, falls through the gaps of support for wider industries.

Not a single British Ceramic Confederation member benefited from the energy security strategy, which focused only on the largest energy-intensive users. The industry is very willing to embrace and move towards net zero, but far more needs to be done to incentivise and support these sectors to invest in new energy-efficient technologies, particularly through R&D. There is a huge opportunity to focus the growth we are seeing in R&D on those energy-intensive sectors where it will be most difficult to achieve the transition towards net zero. We should be focusing R&D on those sectors and helping them to decarbonise. The review of the energy bill relief scheme needs to support and give energy-intensive sectors certainty through the short-term supply-side problems that have been caused by the covid legacy and Putin's terrible, illegal war on Ukraine.

The further extension of Government support to help households with the cost of living and energy cost increases is particularly welcome. We need to work for greater energy independence and alternative sources of energy to address our energy security. As well as Sizewell, that must include an ongoing commitment to small modular reactors, and the consortium led by Rolls-Royce is an exciting development that could create 40,000 jobs and secure many more in the supply chain, including in Stoke-on-Trent at Goodwin International. There is much we can do over the medium term to cut energy bills without the necessary and welcome direct payments currently being made by the Government.

In conclusion, because of the global challenges we have faced, with covid lockdowns and Putin's illegal war on Ukraine, we are far from where we would want to be, economically. The Government have taken steps to ensure that we are on a financially sustainable path towards growth, and I welcome the stability that financial consolidation has brought to markets, but we now must double down on unleashing the growth we need with planning reforms, deregulation, and investment and

licensing in energy supply. The autumn statement takes a good number of steps forward, and I hope we will see many more in the weeks and months ahead.

Jonathan Gullis: More!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Wendy Chamberlain.

5.12 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and apologies; you are stuck with me. This is our third Government and our fourth Chancellor this year, and we do not get our Advent calendars until next week. The right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who is no longer in his place, said that Opposition Members failed to recognise the issues and potentially gave Putin a foot in the door by criticising what the Government announced last week. I am an Opposition MP. It is my job to oppose the Government where I do not agree with them—that is a fundamental part of my job. I do not think anybody can say that Members across the House have not been unanimous in our support for Ukraine. These global events have been developing over the last three years, so why is there such a difference between this autumn statement and the plan for growth eight weeks ago?

The right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) and the hon. Members for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) talked about mistakes being made, and that is the fundamental point. This is about trust, and the Government have damaged not only the trust of the public—the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) said that the Conservatives were trusted more than any other party; she is clearly looking at different polling from me—but the trust of the markets, because we saw a direct impact on people's mortgages and the repayments of Government debt as a result of the plan for growth eight weeks ago.

I would like to touch on a few parts of the statement that my constituents are particularly interested in. The first is the support for off-grid households, which several Members have mentioned. A number of my constituents in North East Fife are off-grid. They had the miserly support of £100. That has now been increased to £200, but it barely touches the sides. We know that off-grid households are facing an average increase of over £1,000 in heating costs, as the cost of oil has almost doubled in the past two months, and some of my small communities who work collectively as a group with brokers to buy oil in bulk are really seeing the impact.

Practically, it is still not clear how the Government are planning to make that payment to households. The relevant gov.uk webpage, which has not been updated since last week's statement, tells off-grid households that they will receive the payment either through their electricity bill, which many of those households will not have, or via a fund that is yet to be designed.

When we think about the poverty premium for those living in rural communities, from the increased cost of transport to having to go to shops where people pay a premium, as opposed to being able to access some of the bigger discounting shops, we realise that is a real hardship for families who are struggling to make ends meet. I hope that the Minister will be able to set out what form the fund will take, how it will reach my constituents who need it, and when it will become operational. I also

[Wendy Chamberlain]

hope for more detail on how we can ensure that residents in park homes and with other energy provision, such as district heating schemes, will receive support and how we can ensure that that support is being passed on by anybody involved in those schemes.

I am sure that the Minister will be aware that during last week's statement I raised the support that businesses receive for energy, and I wrote to the Chancellor yesterday. Businesses in my constituency are very concerned about the current economic outlook. The purpose of my letter was to say that they are keen to engage directly with the ongoing review of the energy relief scheme. They want to demonstrate the vitality of their operations and what they are already doing to reduce their energy costs, because they are struggling to see how they can reduce their costs. Given that it was said last week that we expect the review to set a high bar for support, some of them are beginning to look at their future operating plans.

From the Chancellor's response to me last week, I believe that the review will be done before Christmas, but it is vital for businesses to have that certainty. At this point, we simply do not know which businesses in our communities will have support from April, how much it will be and what form it will take. That will be make or break for some.

Meanwhile, the Government have imposed stealth taxes that will take money out of the pockets of businesses. The decision to freeze the registration threshold for VAT means that businesses will have to charge their customers more or potentially reduce their already small profit margins. I am proud of the number of small businesses that operate across North East Fife, from Leven to Newport and from St Andrews to Cupar. Despite the current outlook, the diversity is increasing, which is great and those entrepreneurs are to be celebrated, but I am concerned that hurting the high street hurts commerce, growth, customers and communities.

I hope that the Minister will therefore clarify what consultation or engagement there will be with businesses on energy, particularly those in critical industries such as food production and social care, and that the Minister will reassure them that a base level of support will remain in place to prevent businesses failing. I urge the Minister to rethink imposing VAT on smaller businesses that need help, not harm, over the coming difficult years; businesses that do not exist cannot grow.

My constituents really care about our place in the world. We have a world-leading university in the University of St Andrews, which was previously involved in international development funding and project delivery. There is no doubt, however, that the 0.7% official development assistance target cut has had an impact on that. Indeed, it was confirmed to me yesterday that those projects are no longer running.

The Chancellor spoke about this being an autumn statement with compassion, but I am concerned that 34.5 million HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria transmissions may become more likely as a result of those cuts. Where is the compassion in taking support away from women and girls around the world who are disproportionately affected by those diseases? We rightly focus on the conflict in Ukraine, but I hope to join students at St Andrews this Sunday as part of the rallies marking

the march for freedom for Afghan women and girls. An ask of that campaign is to maintain the development budget for Afghanistan, particularly for women and girls. That is the least we can do.

The Foreign Secretary's written statement today confirms that the 0.7% test that the Government set is not being met and will not be reinstated, but I welcome the pause on ODA spending being lifted, which is a positive step. If part of the reason we are here is difficult global issues, it is even more important that our place in the world is clear.

I am pleased that the Government made up their mind and did the right thing by uprating benefits and the state pension, which is a huge relief to many. It was clear in the recent Opposition day debate that there was support for the triple lock on both sides of the House. I reiterate what I said then: for all generations, the security of a sustainable state pension is very important. Despite that, pensioners have not yet caught up, given that the triple lock was dropped last year.

On benefits, we know how far behind people on benefits are, because we know that the removal of the £20 uplift for universal credit and the failure ever to uprate legacy benefits have had a devastating impact.

Finally, I hope that Members across the House are aware that I have a private Member's Bill on carer's leave. I am working closely with Carers UK on that, and I just want to bring to the Minister's attention a letter sent last week by Carers UK, along with organisations supporting carers and people with disabilities from around the country. They ask for a top-up payment to be made to unpaid carers who are entitled to carer's allowance without receiving universal credit. They ask that the Government raise the earnings limit for carer's allowance to £199.50 per week, to allow people to work more—we have all talked about people who are economically inactive, and surely we want to put in place measures that will help people to work more. They also ask for a review to be carried out of all relevant benefits, to ensure that unpaid carers do not fall into poverty as a result of their role. Indeed, we will all know of many cases where that is already the case.

I have made this plea before. Almost all of us will either give or receive unpaid care at some point in our lives. That experience is unique to each person, but it is also universal. The simple step of allowing carers to work more would not even be adding to the Government's budget, so I really do hope that the Treasury will consider those reforms.

5.21 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): May I reassure the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) that it is an absolute pleasure not just to have heard her, but to follow her in this Chamber and be able to talk about the autumn statement?

I have been informed that Labour's friends in the socialist cesspit that is Twitter got very excited when the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), in response to my question about whether the Opposition can promise the British people that taxes will not increase beyond where they are now on the working people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, simply said that I should sit and

listen. Well, I did sit and I did listen, and all I heard was taxes going up here, taxes going up there, tax more of this and tax more of that.

This was reaffirmed when I intervened on a number of great Labour Back Benchers, who I like to call friends. When asked a very simple question—whether they could make a promise in this House to the people of Bradford East and Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, for example, that taxes will not increase—all I was told was to go home and answer some questions about the Conservatives' record in the great city of Stoke-on-Trent, as well as the great town of Kidsgrove and neighbouring Talke.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): In my hon. Friend's assessment, because we cannot get that assurance—I hope the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) is listening—what does he estimate Labour's tax bombshell to be for our constituents in the west midlands, because it sounds as if there is definitely one incoming?

Jonathan Gullis: My hon. Friend, who is a fine and doughty champion for the people of Tipton and the surrounding area, makes a great point. I know that the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), is a good man who likes to answer questions, and always with a straight bat. So I look forward to hearing him guarantee that, under a Labour Government, no taxes will go up on anyone in, for example, the 20p income tax bracket. If he can give such an assurance, I will probably have to pack my bags as a Member of Parliament and accept reality, but I am not so sure I will get that straight answer on this particular question.

I was told very clearly that I should go and get answers to questions. Well, I have come and marked my own homework, but I think it is important to give answers to those hon. Members, because they did ask for them. It is under this Conservative Government, under a Conservative-led Stoke-on-Trent City Council, and under a Conservative-led Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council—Conservative-led for the first time—that we have seen £56 million from the levelling-up fund, which is the largest levelling-up fund grant given to any single area. That means the great town of Tunstall is about to get £3.5 million to refurbish and bring new life to Tunstall library and baths. There is also the fantastic scheme by Stoke-on-Trent railway station—a gateway to our community—for the Goods Yard site, which is going to provide offices, homes, and restaurant and retail experiences to bring in new revenue to our area.

There is the £17.6 million Kidsgrove town deal, the first of its kind in an area such as Kidsgrove, which has seen Kidsgrove sports centre not just refurbished, but reopened. It has reopened after, sadly, the Labour party, which ran Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council at the time, chose to close it, because when the council was offered the opportunity for a single £1 coin to save it, it rejected that offer. I will make a donation of that pound coin to the Labour party, so that if it ever finds itself in that situation again, it can cough up—I am happy to register that among my donations in kind.

The £31.7 million “bus back better” investment has meant that not only are we improving bus services and introducing a new flat fare of £3.50 a day; we are also

improving our road infrastructure. There are 500 brand new Home Office jobs. The site of Chatterley Valley West will unlock up to 1,700 jobs, as part of the new advanced ceramics campus—the list goes on.

Tomorrow, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will mean that rogue and absent landlords who plague our high streets and our heritage will get a fine that has increased from £1,000 to an unlimited amount for the first offence, and from £100 a day to £500 a day for the second offence. While the Labour party and my Labour opponents were standing outside buildings two days before polling day with placards to protest, I was busy looking at the law, coming up with a solution, presenting it to the House, and getting the Government on board. Tomorrow we will vote the Bill through before it goes to the other place to complete its journey. That is what Conservatism is all about in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke.

Let me tell the House what people know about the Labour party locally. They know that when Labour is in charge, ceramics manufacturers are closed and move overseas. They see wages stagnate or go down, unlike under the Conservatives, when people saw an 11.7% wage increase between 2015 and 2018. They saw jobs disappear, until a Conservative-led city council managed to bring 9,000 jobs to our city since 2015, 2,000 of which are linked to the Ceramic Valley enterprise zone. When the Labour party was in charge it had £60 million in Stoke-on-Trent City Council coffers. It could have spent that on the mother town, Burslem, and invested in the Queen's Theatre, the Wedgwood Institute and Burslem indoor market, revitalising that vital, historic town. What did it do? The money got festered away on new council offices. Rather than worrying about the people of the town, Labour councillors were worried about whether their office had enough square footage to fit their egos. Sadly, they chose to go with that option instead.

It is a crying shame that for 70 years the Labour party abandoned the great people of Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke. It is a great shame that it took the Conservative party to come in for Labour Members even to realise where Stoke-on-Trent was, and to no longer rely on Google maps or a pre-paid taxi to find their way there. While they visit our city and promise this and that, the people of Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke know—they have seen the evidence in the past, and the counter-evidence of Conservatism since then.

We are talking about the autumn statement, Madam Deputy Speaker, so it is important that I refer to that in this important debate. It is exceptionally important to understand that we have had a global pandemic—a once-in-100-year event that I hope that my children and grandchildren never have to experience in their lifetime. That was followed by the impact of locking down the entire global economy, meaning that when demand increases supply chains cannot keep up with that demand. That is understandable, because people were being asked to stay at home, protect lives and save the NHS from being overrun.

Those were the facts of the day, and just as we were learning to come to terms with them, Vladimir Putin chose to have an illegal and immoral war against the great people of Ukraine—Slava Ukraini, Madam Deputy Speaker. Unfortunately, he then used against anyone who stood up to him gas, and other forms of energy, as a weapon to try to cripple our resilience. Well, guess what?

[Jonathan Gullis]

We will get through this, because we as a country are brilliant. We did it in world war one, we did it in world war two, we did it with the Falklands, we did it with Iraq and Afghanistan, and we will certainly do it again by backing the people of Ukraine. We will make sure that we have those people's backs, because we believe in freedom, not oppression. It is a shame that when we have these discussions the Labour party tries to pretend that those things never happened. The fact is that they have happened, and they have all come at once. I hope that no one will ever have to live through such times again.

What have the Government done? They have invested £12 billion extra in support for the most vulnerable households in our community. That is on top of the £37 billion already announced, and the energy price cap guarantee. That has made a humungous difference to one ceramics manufacturer in Stoke-on-Trent North, which has told me that the price cap will save it £4 million over the winter months. Without that £4 million it could have meant jobs going or the factory having to shut permanently, because it simply would not have been affordable. This Government have given it that support.

The support we have given to individuals, including the price cap and the money given, means that the average Stokie will get around £2,000 of support over the next two years. In fact, those on means-tested benefits will get around £4,000 of direct support over the next two years for them and their household, because this is a compassionate Conservative Government, and I am proud to be a part of it.

There are other important measures. The increase in the national living wage is fantastic. Where Stoke-on-Trent has a lot of people earning the national living wage, that increase will see those in full-time work £1,600 a year better off. That is a huge amount of money. We have also got the £12,500 personal tax-free allowance and the increase in the national insurance threshold to match that, which means that some Stokies are not paying any tax whatsoever. This is a good day for the people of Stoke-on-Trent. The triple lock being protected is also fantastic.

It has not been mentioned much, but in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke we were very happy to see the freeze in foreign aid take place. We certainly believe that charity begins at home and, when we are going through hard times, people in this country should have their taxes spent on them and be protected first. I hope that one day the Government will scrap the ridiculous arbitrary target of 0.7%, which was a virtue-signalling idea brought in under a previous Conservative Government. I certainly was not a fan of it from the outside and I am proud to stand here and say that we need to move away from it. We should have flexibility to choose what we invest in, when we invest in it and how much we choose to invest each year, depending on our circumstances here at home. I do hope that Labour Members get very angry that I said that, because, if they go around and put that all over social media, that will only help me to get more votes in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. They might want to think carefully before trying to campaign against me on that one.

Let us also talk about the absolutely fantastic £4.4 billion on schools. That is great news, seeing what pressures were on schools. But two things in that are important

for the Government. First, I am worried that, as *Schools Week* reported, there may be clawback on the national tutoring programme underspend, which is estimated to be between £100 million and £150 million. I hope that the Treasury keeps its fingers off that and instead lets the Department for Education reinvest it into the third year of the national tutoring programme so that it can increase the grant available to schools and we can hit that figure of 6 million opportunities for young people.

Secondly, the £2.5 billion of pupil premium money must be spent in the right way. Sadly, we are not tracking how it is being invested in our schools. I am proud to support Magic Breakfast schemes such as at Q3 Academy Langley in Sandwell and those in Stoke-on-Trent North, because those schemes are making sure that kids get a breakfast, which we know via the Education Endowment Foundation has a positive impact on behaviour, attendance and academic attainment, which is so vital. I do not believe in universality for these schemes—they should be targeted—and the Government must be committed to redoing the deal with Magic Breakfast and expanding it to another 10,000 schools. I look forward to working with MPs across the House on that.

I am concerned that, when we talk about taxing private schools, we are talking about taxing aspiration. Many individuals in my constituency who work in factories or even as cleaners want to send their kids to the best school because they want them to have the best start. If we followed Labour's plan, that would mean more children entering the state school system and putting more financial pressure on the Department for Education and its budgets. Actually, that would not even bring in the revenue year on year that Labour predicts, because it assumes that numbers will remain the same. It is simply not correct to claim that £1.7 billion a year will exist, as numbers will leave the private school sector and come into the state school sector. Suddenly, we may need to find hundreds of thousands of school places that simply do not exist, burdening classrooms that are already on the brink.

We also have the health and social care increase of £7.7 billion. That is super-important and very good, but, as I have said, the "No Time To Wait" campaign, led by myself and James Starkie—it is a cross-party campaign, which I am proud that Members of the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats support—has a pilot ready to go with the Royal College of Nursing looking at how we can get mental health nurses into GP surgeries. I hope that the Government will back it. I look forward to raising that at Prime Minister's questions tomorrow.

Finally—I promise that this is finally, Madam Deputy Speaker—I turn to fuel duty. I thank the Chancellor for coming out quickly and making it clear that, despite what was in the OBR forecasts, the 5p cut and the freeze to fuel duty will remain in place, as was agreed, until March 2023. I am proud to be *The Sun* and FairFuelUK's "keep it down" champion here in Parliament. I will make one thing clear to the Government: I will ensure that, as a bare minimum, that 5p cut stays in place. If we want to ensure that motorists, van drivers and lorry drivers—the 37 million people on the roads day in, day out—are on our side, we had better make sure that we have their backs. We know that cutting fuel duty cuts inflation because it means that distribution costs are cheaper, and 98% of our goods are driven on the roads to the shops. I hope that the Government will reaffirm their commitment.

5.34 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): Anyone who looks at the autumn statement and sees it for what it is understands that poverty will increase as a direct result. The decision to increase benefits by 10.1% next year does not match the rate of inflation, which is 11.1% in the most recent monthly data. Millions of the poorest in our country will still face a fall in spending power as inflation soars. This follows years of cuts to the real value of benefits that affect the lives of 9 million households; and, particularly for some Government Members and members of the press who like to demonise people on benefits, I point out that 7 million of those households include someone who is in work. The situation is even worse than the headline inflation data suggest. The Office for National Statistics estimates that consumer price inflation is actually higher for lower income groups—11.9% for those in the second income decile, and a truly shocking 12.5% for those in the very lowest. So as a result of the decisions on benefits, the very poorest will get even poorer.

The picture is similar for the minimum wage, which Conservatives continue to falsely claim is the national living wage. This was not, as the Chancellor claimed, a generous offer. A rise of 9.7% is also below inflation and way below the inflation rate for the poorest. The Real Living Wage Foundation says that a living wage worthy of the name would be £10.90 across the country, and in London it would need to be £11.95 per hour to take account of the higher costs of living in the capital. So the announcement in the autumn statement was in fact a real-terms cut that leaves the lowest paid workers worse off and still struggling for a wage they can actually live on.

Much of the excess—not all—relates to the cost of housing, either rent or mortgage. We all know very well the damage this Government have already caused in terms of mortgage costs, but we have yet to hear Ministers apologise for their actions during this debacle, which is their responsibility and theirs alone. The Government seem to treat people like my constituents in Streatham as though they are all junior investment bankers or recently hired City lawyers, who are taking their first steps on the housing ladder that leads to a lovely town house worth millions somewhere in central London—but they are not. They are young people living together in cramped accommodation because they cannot afford to pay rents, or families who have just seen their mortgage interest payments shoot up because of the actions of this Government; or they are simply forced to live at home, unable to pay for a place of their own.

In fact, this Government's whole propaganda campaign on levelling up never included the poorest in London. How can there be levelling up when the poorest are made even poorer by this statement and when the cost of living is being made unbearable by the direct actions of this Government? We should not be surprised by this con, because we know what the Prime Minister thinks about the reality of levelling up. He was caught on camera boasting that he had redirected funding from deprived urban areas to well-to-do areas.

Most notably, the statement did not once mention the disastrous impact of Brexit. The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), said that no one wanted to talk about Brexit, but I do. I remain proud of my

decision to vote against the implementation agreement—not a deal. Contrary to what was said repeatedly in this House, no deal was put before us in December 2020. We, the representatives of the people of this country, were not given a say in the details of the deal, and we were given no meaningful vote on it. Instead, we were presented with a shoddy implementation agreement at the eleventh hour, strong-armed again into being for or against, and threatened with crashing out of the EU without a deal.

What do we have to show for Brexit? Spiralling inflation, travel chaos, labour shortages, crops rotting in the fields, a significant reduction to British exports, a loss of work and opportunities due to visa restrictions, food prices hiked up in our supermarkets, and the sharpest fall in living standards on record—and that is not even all of it. Whether people voted to leave or whether, like most of the people in my constituency, they voted to remain, nobody voted for this. We can no longer hide behind the economic effects of the pandemic when all the other G7 countries have bounced back and ours is the only country with a smaller economy now and is set to have the lowest growth in the G20 bar Russia. Yet the Chancellor was arrogant enough to come to the House and pretend that Brexit had nothing to do with the situation we find ourselves in.

If the people of this country are the most important thing in this country, then there is no patriotism and certainly no freedom in the inept economic policies the Government have inflicted on all of us. Brexit has been a complete and utter disaster, and if the Government do not address it there will be a reckoning. In the meantime, the average person in this country is left to pay the price.

Jonathan Gullis: The hon. Lady is giving a very passionate defence of why she believes Brexit to be a disaster. Obviously, I think differently. If Labour was in Government, would she be giving the same speech to her Front Bench?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I believe the hon. Member does not know me very well. I would be giving exactly the same speech.

I could say much more about the reinforcement of entrenched discrimination that the Government have carried out and which the statement exacerbates, but in conclusion, the vulnerable have not been protected by the Government and the statement has made them even worse off.

5.40 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), even though on this occasion I do not agree with anything she said. But it was a very passionate speech.

This is exactly the budget we needed to deal with the global economic turmoil we are facing. It was mature, balanced, considered and, above all, deeply compassionate. As the Chancellor said himself, to be British is to be compassionate and this is a compassionate Conservative Government. I have sat here amazed to hear all the comments from those on the Opposition Benches telling us we have failed to make the right choices, telling us we have been uncompassionate and telling us that this budget is full of an unwavering commitment to look after people at the top. I do not know where you have been. Can I just remind you, this is the budget—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I have been here.

Anna Firth: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I remind Opposition Members that this budget is bringing in the largest ever increase to the national living wage—as we have heard, £1,600 on average for millions and millions of workers. These are not people at the top of the tree.

Shaun Bailey: My hon. Friend is making a very passionate speech. On the living wage, the Labour party will not commit to not raising taxes on low-end workers. How much would Labour's tax bombshell take from those on the living wage? Clearly, we have got one incoming; we can see it over there. What is her estimate, if Labour does raise taxes on people at the lower end of the tax spectrum?

Anna Firth: I very much hope we are not going to see tax rises. On the Government Benches, we are absolutely committed to protecting hard-working people, but at the moment we have heard no clarity—my hon. Friend is absolutely right—from the Opposition. There has to be a doubt that under their policy, taxes will go up on hard-working people.

The second point is that we have heard a lot about benefits not going up in line with inflation—another extraordinary comment. I remind Opposition Members that the OBR forecast that UK inflation will be 9.1% this year, going down to 7.4% next year. So, on the contrary, rather than our uprating of benefits not being enough, our uprating of benefits to inflation at over 10% is generous. Again, that is helping the most vulnerable.

Thirdly, we are keeping energy bills down for every single household across the country. Fourthly, on top of that, we are offering direct support for 8 million low-income households to the tune of £900 per household. Then, of course, we come to the triple lock. When the Conservatives came into coalition Government in 2010, pensioner poverty was a real issue. It was one of the legacies we were left to sort out. Since then, over the last 12 years, which we are harangued about regularly, we have protected pensioners. We brought in the triple lock and we have now restored it—the biggest ever cash rise for every single recipient of state pension ever next April. But more than that, for the poorest pensioners, pension credit will go up and be linked to inflation. Again, there will be £1,470 for a pensioner couple and another £960 for a single pensioner. That is before we get to more funding for the NHS and schools. People would think that we were not funding our NHS at all when, in fact, we are increasing the spending on the NHS to £166 billion, the highest amount ever.

Jonathan Gullis: My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech about the extra £4.4 billion going into schools over the next two years, but she should add that the Department for Education secured a successful spending review 2021, which included an additional £7 billion over the spending review period. We have more than £10 billion extra going into education, and we have been congratulated on that by many in the sector and by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, for example.

Anna Firth: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I am extremely grateful to the Chancellor for listening to all those in the sector, and my hon. Friend is a fantastic advocate for schools in his constituency.

My question is this: if we have failed to make the right choices, which of all those compassionate choices do Opposition Members not like? What would their response have been if we had not made them? I think we all know: there would have been absolute outrage and we would have been roundly accused of being uncompassionate. I will take no lectures from Opposition Members about this not being a compassionate statement.

At the heart of the autumn statement is a commitment to economic stability, tackling inflation and growth. There are many paths to prosperity, but they all begin with economic stability. Without economic stability, Southend's brilliant life sciences sector, with our globally leading companies such as Olympus KeyMed and ESSLAB, cannot innovate and expand. Without economic stability, Southend's fantastic exporters such as Ipeco and Borough plating cannot conquer new markets. Without economic stability, Southend's wonderful entrepreneurs, such as Tapp'd Cocktails and Adventure Island, cannot flourish. And without economic stability, Southend's world-famous, 1,000-year-old cockle industry, based in Old Leigh, cannot invest in new plant and equipment. Economic stability is a down-payment on creating lasting economic growth, which we need if we are going to get the tax take to tackle inequality, improve our public services and provide opportunities for everyone in our society.

If we are going to drive up future economic growth and productivity, we must ensure that the UK economy is the most innovative in the world. The Chancellor was right to point out that in Britain we have a national genius for innovation, but we must invest in and encourage it. That is why I particularly welcome the Chancellor's commitment to investing in research and development. The increase of more than a third is the largest in R&D spending ever. We know that every pound invested in R&D returns 25% every year forever, and that for every pound spent by Government on research and development, private sector R&D output rises by 20p a year in perpetuity. In other words, the more we invest in R&D, the more we create the high-paid, high-skilled jobs of the future.

If anyone is in any doubt about the importance of research and development in this country, they can consider covid. It is because 25% of the world's top 100 prescription medicines were discovered and developed in the UK that those companies were able to use their expertise to create our world-beating coronavirus vaccine, assisted—I am proud to say—by using products developed in Southend West by Olympus KeyMed. The increase in research and development spending will allow our companies to develop new, transformative ideas, to innovate and to flourish. I would welcome a meeting with the Chancellor to explore how Southend West's businesses can benefit from the new spending.

As well as being a fantastic example of a British city that has world-class innovation and is home to 3,700 businesses, Southend has an inspirational University of Essex campus. As the Chancellor has said, we must leverage the opportunities that Brexit has offered and build on our strengths; Southend is the perfect location for one of the new cluster-style investment zones based around universities. We are situated at the gateway to the Thames, an area with huge potential for economic development. It has the potential to double its economy and create 1,300 new jobs over the next 25 years. The new

city of Southend is ideally placed to be a world-leading life sciences hub, with businesses and the University of Essex working together.

I welcome the Chancellor's ongoing commitment to levelling up the country. I particularly welcome his commitment that funds will be forthcoming for the levelling-up projects that have been bid for, because in Southend we are set to benefit from £20 million of levelling-up money, a large portion of which is going towards upgrading the port of Old Leigh in my constituency. That will help our cockle industry, which is one of the oldest and already one of the greenest in the world, but we want to go further.

We are coming to the end of a 30-year licensing cycle, so it is now time to plan for the next 1,000 years of Leigh's cockle industry. We need a new state-of-the-art processing centre so that our cockles do not need to be taken all over the place. Cockles landed in Old Leigh need to be processed in Old Leigh. I welcome the Chancellor's commitment on LUF2 money. May I put in an early bid for levelling-up funds to come to Old Leigh and finish the job by creating a clean, green industry fit for the next 1,000 years of shellfish fishing?

Levelling up is not just about businesses, but about our public services. I welcome the Chancellor's commitment to increase the core schools budget by £2.3 billion in each of the next two years, which will benefit all 29 of Southend West's wonderful schools. I also welcome the £3.3 billion of extra funding for our NHS in both of the next two years, which raises our NHS spending to the highest amount ever. It cannot be said that the NHS is not being looked after or that it is not safe on our watch; it plainly is, although of course there are stresses. Our doctors and nurses in Southend are doing an absolutely wonderful job and are innovating because of the pressure on A&E.

We now have the new ambulance handover unit that I and other south Essex MPs have campaigned so hard for, but I would like to press the Chancellor on one area. He has mentioned his commitment to the capital spending programme for hospitals. Ever since I was elected, as many hon. Members know, I have been pushing for the capital promised to us in 2017 to be forthcoming. Some £51 million was promised for essential renovations at Southend University Hospital. We need £7 million of enabling funding to move on to the next stage. I have been calling for that funding in every place I have managed to get into, and I do so again. I would like to meet the Chancellor at the earliest possible moment and make a plan for the delivery of that long-awaited essential funding.

I would like to finish by congratulating the Chancellor on his outstanding autumn statement, which will deliver economic stability. As the Prime Minister said in his Mais lecture earlier this year, we need an economy

"where businesses are investing more; where people of all ages are supported to learn; and, most importantly, where ideas and innovation constantly transform our lives."

I believe that this autumn statement sets the UK on a course to delivering just that.

5.54 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I will be relatively brief, not least because I have noticed that Ludmila Morris is in the Gallery. She recently retired

after years of service as the head of the McMillan children's nursery in my constituency, and I have invited her for tea.

It is important in this debate to reflect on what is actually happening outside this House. In the discussions so far—in the statement, in the debate yesterday and in some of the debate today—there has been little mention of wages. It is important that we understand why we are faced with the prospect of up to 1 million workers taking industrial action over the coming months. After the chaos of the last two months, the obvious aim of the Chancellor was to reassure the markets that, as he described it, the grown-ups were back in charge and that he had a plan to rebalance the budget. He especially wanted the markets to know that the Bank of England and the Government were marching in lockstep, as he put it. It is true: they are marching in lockstep, but the problem is that they now have a common agenda that combines austerity and increases in interest rates. This is pushing us ineluctably into a deepening recession.

We all hope that this will be a shallow and short-lived recession, but there are nevertheless large numbers of people out there who after 12 years of austerity just do not have the financial resilience left to avoid the hardship that this will inflict upon them. Part of that is about wages. I have listened to the various debates and heard the statistics being bandied about, but just for the record—because sometimes statistics cannot lie—wages today are lower than they were in 2007, and what is worrying me is that they are not forecast to reach 2007 levels again until 2028. That is 21 years of pay cuts.

The number of workers earning below the real living wage is expected to rise to 5.1 million next year. With inflation at 11.1%—I hope it is declining but we cannot be sure—we are experiencing the largest drop in living wages on record. Average wage rises in the private sector are 6.6%, but just 2.2% in the public sector. When the Chancellor spoke about nurses, he urged them to avoid taking industrial action, but we need to understand why they are even thinking about it. According to the TUC, nurses' pay in real terms is £2,500 lower today than it was in 2010, so the Royal College of Nursing has asked for RPI plus 5%, which would meet inflation this year and restore some of the drop in wages that they have experienced.

I have been looking at the stats again, and what is interesting is that we think we are one of the richest nations on earth—the fifth or sixth biggest economy on the planet—but that wealth is not shared. By GDP per capita, we barely make the top 20 and we are below the average of the 19 countries in the euro and below the OECD average. As a result of that, people are suffering out there. I raised the issue of housing with the Chancellor last week. I always look at housing as the canary in the mine to judge how people are faring. When people budget, they usually prioritise keeping a roof over their head. The figures show that, last year, mortgage possession orders increased by just under 500% and landlord possession orders increased by more than 160%, which shows that people are on the edge. Unless wages increase, more will fall over that cliff edge.

The Chancellor made a great deal—we have heard it again today—about increases to NHS and school budgets, but it must surely dawn on Members that, if the wage settlements for nurses and teachers go anywhere near what they need and what they are asking for, those

[John McDonnell]

increases will be completely wiped out. Other departmental budgets fare even worse: they are expected to swallow inflation and wage cost increases in total.

I want the House to understand the situation people face. The energy cap is being lifted to £3,000, tax thresholds are being frozen, which will draw more people into tax, and mortgages and rents are rocketing. Many more people are asking how they will get by in this coming period. There is a growing atmosphere of frustration and, for those in in-work poverty, a growing atmosphere of absolute desperation, which is why increasing numbers of people feel they have little option but to demand a pay increase that at least matches the rate of inflation. If that means a pay offer is rejected, many of them feel they have no other option but to support industrial action. As we know, people do not take industrial action lightly.

If NHS managers, headteachers and other public service leaders try to accommodate inflation-proofed wage settlements in their existing budgets, the inevitable result will be cuts in services. Any of us who visits an A&E department anywhere in the country will see how stretched the NHS is at the moment, and how dangerous any further cuts would be. Ask any headteacher about their school's budget, and they will say that, after 12 years of austerity—no matter what has been said today about increases—job cuts are the only remaining method to balance their budget if they are to meet pay demands.

It has been calculated that £100 billion of central Government support has been taken away from local government over the last 12 years due to central Government decisions. We now have a situation where local authorities, Tory and Labour alike, are basically saying that they are on the edge of bankruptcy and that there is no way they can accommodate increased wages to match inflation.

My simple message is that what is missing from this Budget, and has almost not been debated, is the Government's inability or lack of willingness to inflation-proof wages in this coming period. That will almost inevitably result in escalating industrial action, which I will support because I do not know what else people can do to try to secure a pay deal that lifts some out of poverty and protects others from dropping into poverty.

The Budget also demonstrates that there seems to be a deep failure in Government to comprehend the consequences of the last 12 years. As we have heard in today's debate, one consequence is that more and more people are on the edge and, unless there is some support, particularly on wages and benefits, they will be pushed over that edge. For the first time since the 1930s, a UN rapporteur on the state of this country is talking about destitution. So we need an alternative programme for government, which is being developed by those on the Labour Benches at least. We need a longer-term plan, rather than short-term decision making, one based on redistributive taxation that will fund our public services and address the poverty and inequality that scar our society. We need a programme for securing stable, long-term investment in our infrastructure, but also in our people, so we can mobilise our whole economy to tackle the challenges we face of poverty and inequality, and the rising challenge of climate change. I was hoping to hear

that from this Budget. That has not happened. I have to agree that the only way that debate will seriously happen in the coming months is if we have a general election.

6.5 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who outlined the serious situation we all face in the economy and given the pressure on household incomes. He delivered his speech in a sombre tone that was not too dissimilar to that taken by the Chancellor last week. That is unsurprising, given that the statement was delivered against the backdrop of such high inflation and low growth, and forecasts that household disposable incomes are set to fall significantly. Given such dire economic circumstances, I was pleased that common sense prevailed and measures such as the retention of the triple lock on the state pension and the uprating of many of the benefits in line with inflation were progressed at last week's statement. I am happy to say that they will be of great benefit and support to a high number of my constituents.

Nevertheless, I wish to outline a few of my thoughts as to why the balance between addressing the immediate inflationary pressures that everyone is facing and the longer-term productivity problems that have afflicted the economy for several years was not quite right last week. For households across Wales, last week's statement risks offering little more than a continuation of the managed decline we have sadly come to expect. That reality was underlined by the Wales Governance Centre's calculation that, on the present trajectory, Welsh incomes will be £10,300 lower by 2027 than they would have been had pre-financial crisis levels of growth been sustained.

If we are to have any hope of reversing that trend, the Welsh economy needs concerted investment in our underlying infrastructure: our power grid; our transport links; and digital connectivity. Many Members have spoken before about the importance of digital infrastructure and transport links, so I will not detain the House on those points, but it is worth reiterating the importance of investing in the power grid.

The Welsh Affairs Committee has been undertaking an inquiry on the potential for offshore wind generation off the coast of Pembrokeshire, in south-west Wales. We received a lot of evidence from stakeholders to show that, if that fantastic potential is to be realised and we are to progress with a cutting-edge, new industry—the manufacture, production and installation of offshore wind turbines—that is centred in south-west Wales, bringing incredibly high-wage and important careers, we need to invest in the grid to ensure that a lot of that power can be connected and fed into the UK's grid. We need to press on and be honest with ourselves that, with the current state of play, a lot of that potential cannot be realised, it needs to be looked at again by the National Grid and, potentially, it needs further Government investment.

Likewise, the Government need to be honest on the question of our trading relationship with our nearest trading bloc. The OBR report concluded again that the UK's trade intensity will be some 15% lower in the long term because of our new trading relationship with the EU. The UK Government can take practical steps now to help to ameliorate that economic pain by removing

unnecessary trade friction, which has devastated the operations of many businesses in Ceredigion, which are finding it nigh on impossible to export goods to the EU.

I know that that is a debate for another time, but there are mutual recognition agreements that we could be exploring. If that is a step too far, I would like us to see what support there is in terms of resource and advice for small businesses in particular, many of which in my constituency are finding it very difficult to navigate the new rules. They are finding it incredibly difficult, for example, to know how to get confirmation that they are using the right goods classification code before an export or, indeed, before an import arrives at port. These are practical ways that could greatly help small businesses in places such as Ceredigion to improve a bit on their trade with the European Union. A failure to address that issue now will simply pass on the burden to future generations.

The same is true on the question of energy security. We now know that, from April 2023, energy bills will surpass the £3,000 limit. To give a sense of the impact that this increase will have, it is worth recalling that, in April this year, the Welsh Government estimated that average bills of more than £1,900 a year could push up to 45% of all households in Wales into fuel poverty, with 8% thrown into severe fuel poverty.

Given the scale of the crisis, efforts should focus on permanently reducing the impact of energy bills on households across these islands. The inefficiency of our housing stock means that households are wasting hundreds of pounds a year on energy that escapes through draughty walls, leaky windows and ceilings. That issue is particularly acute in Wales given that we have some of the oldest and least efficient housing in western Europe. The Chancellor acknowledged that issue during his statement last week, yet his answer to today's problem is to bring forward new funding in 2025.

We are already paying the price for a lack of action in this area. The New Economics Foundation recently estimated that, if all homes in England and Wales were rated EPC C, UK Government spending on the energy price guarantee would have been around £3.5 billion less over six months and households—just as important perhaps—would save around £530 over the next year. Additional funding in home energy efficiency measures should be accelerated and would be worth every single penny.

Direct help to facilitate energy efficiency improvements now can also protect businesses from similar energy shocks in future. I encourage the UK Government to look at proposals that have been put forward by the Federation of Small Businesses, which has called on the UK Government to issue vouchers worth £5,000 for small and medium businesses to spend on qualifying energy-saving products and services.

Many of my colleagues have already touched on this topic, but I make no apologies for reiterating some of the concerns with regard to off-grid households and businesses. I plead with those on the Treasury Bench to provide greater clarity on the support for off-grid homes. The Chancellor told us last week that the support was being doubled from £100 to £200 and that the first payment was introduced to coincide with the first six months of the energy price guarantee. Given that the scheme for households who are connected to the grid

will be extended, albeit at a reduced rate, from April, can off-grid homes expect a second round of the alternative fuel payment?

If I can be so bold, I would like to ask a few questions. When are we expecting these payments to be brought forward? I know that households are finding it very difficult now. We have just had a bit of a cold spell, so this is very much at the front of people's minds. It is the same for off-grid businesses. It is unfortunate that many are starting to make very difficult decisions. Any clarity that can be given by the Government as to what sort of support they will be entitled to and when it will be brought forward could go a long way in helping them with some of their plans for the next six months.

I welcome the UK Government's commitment to uprate many benefits in line with inflation, but I am concerned that they have been inconsistent in their approach by failing to uprate some others in line with inflation. In particular, they have failed to uprate the level of support available for rental costs via the local housing allowance, which is having a devastating impact. Wales is experiencing the second fastest growth in rental costs across Great Britain, which means that the gap between housing benefit and the cheapest rents is rising at a rapid pace. Less than 1% of private rented homes in Wales are affordable to low-income renters. I regret to have to report to the House that, in Ceredigion, it means that those in receipt of the benefit will need to earn a staggering £3,382 more per year to afford the cheapest rent.

In conclusion, will the Government bring forward much-needed support for renters in my constituency by looking again at the freeze on the local housing allowance and uprating it annually to match at least the 30th percentile of market rents? I fear that failing to move on this matter will condemn a great many people to homelessness this winter.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Any Members who have taken part in the debate should really make their way to the Chamber now for the wind-ups, which will follow Beth Winter.

6.18 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), who outlined the acute problems facing Wales and who, like me, is a vociferous campaigner for better needs-based funding for Wales.

Both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have been at pains to state their intention to deliver stability following the Tory mini-Budget that crashed the economy, but it is worth asking what kind of stability they are talking about. Stability for whom? Some 14 million people in the United Kingdom currently live in poverty, and the Chancellor has delivered an autumn statement that will force millions more into poverty, all in the name of stability.

Inaction on pay and public service funding and stealth taxation on low and middle incomes in this statement have made people's lives more unstable, precarious and difficult. That is certainly the case for people and communities in my Cynon Valley constituency. The Welsh Finance Minister, Rebecca Evans, was clear that inflation has eroded the Welsh Government's budget.

[Beth Winter]

I listened earlier to the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) commenting on health issues in Wales, and others have also spoken about health problems. The fact of the matter is that the settlement over the spending review period is worth less in real terms in Wales than it was at the time of spending review last year and includes a £1.1 billion shortfall compared with when we were a member of the European Union.

We need to see the Welsh budget increased in line with inflation, but that has not happened. The Welsh Local Government Association is clear that cuts will have devastating consequences for communities. The leader of the WLGA, Andrew Morgan, who is also the council leader for my constituency, stated that

“instead of avoiding disaster, this Autumn Statement is headed straight for the danger.”

My constituency faces a deficit of around £47 million next year. There is nowhere else to cut. People are frightened—they are at their wits' end.

Moving to incomes, the historic fall in real incomes is due to concrete decisions taken by the Chancellor and his predecessors. The Tories are driving down pay and, to justify it, many are making false claims of a wage-price spiral. But pay is not driving inflation; it is lagging behind. The reality is that a Tory low pay agenda has existed since 2010: pay freeze after pay freeze, devaluing and demeaning our key workers. With no dedicated announcement on public sector pay, key workers now face further real-terms reductions in pay.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) outlined the difficult situation facing our key workers. To add to that, the Resolution Foundation has said that real wages should be around £15,000 higher based on past trends, and the TUC says that real earnings will not return to 2008 levels until 2027. I am repeating what my right hon. Friend said earlier, but it needs emphasising, because people are experiencing pay cuts—two decades of lost pay. It is those pay decisions that are driving industrial action, which is a last resort for workers. That is delivering instability and economic destruction.

The statement announced a range of new tax increases, but the impact again falls disproportionately on those least able to bear it. The TUC said that the hit from the 20% income tax threshold will earn the Treasury £6 billion a year compared with less than £1 billion from lowering the threshold for paying the top rate. As with austerity, that punishes those on low and middle incomes to fill a self-imposed and questionable “fiscal black hole.”

However, there is an alternative. Member after Member on the Government Benches have said that the Labour Members are not offering other solutions, but there are plenty of other solutions. We need the wealthiest individuals and biggest corporations to pay their fair share. The Budget introduced only meagre measures to levy funds from sources of wealth, and vast untaxed wealth is still being accumulated. There are numerous measures we could pursue, including abolishing non-dom status, equalising capital gains tax with income tax rates, and introducing a financial transactions tax, a one-off tax or even a new wealth tax. Hundreds of billions of pounds could and should be raised by taxing wealth and the rich in this country, and we should end the tax giveaway for the oil and gas giants' fossil-fuel exploration.

Those measures would redistribute some of the wealth of the few to secure a better future for the many, while boosting growth. Putting more money in people's pockets will increase spending in the local economy and boost growth, and that is why I will continue to back our trade unions. Investing in public services will ensure that people's needs are met, and that is why I back our local authorities and the demands for better settlements for public services.

The autumn statement does not deal with the household cost of living crisis, the public service funding crisis or the climate crisis. It sets the wrong priorities, and all in the name of stability. Until a Budget robustly redistributes the money from the few to the many and gets the economy moving, the same problems and the instability we face will continue and worsen.

To conclude, I and many on the Labour Benches will continue to support the trade union-led campaigns to lift incomes, and I will stand shoulder to shoulder with them, with local councils and with communities for higher pay for everyone in our society and fairer taxation of the rich and powerful. *Diolch yn fawr.*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We come now to the wind-ups. I call the shadow Minister.

6.22 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to wind up on behalf of the Opposition. I welcome the new Minister to her place and wish her well. I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. We have heard many passionate speeches, appeals for different sectors—from cockles to hospitality, and from the gaming sector to many of the industrial sectors that make Britain great—and appeals for different areas. People spoke passionately about how the cost of living crisis is affecting their constituencies. We heard discussion of individual measures in the autumn statement and, of course, we have had lively debate on how we got here in the first place.

This debate, like the autumn statement itself, has covered a lot of ground. But for all the individual parts of last week's autumn statement, in the end the Chancellor's speech was an hour-long reckoning with the Conservatives' 12 years in office. It was not meant to be like this. The promise was of a better tomorrow; the good times were supposed to be coming. Instead, there was a more bitter conclusion: the Government have failed. They have failed over 12 years, and the autumn statement sent the bill for that failure to the British people. With every measure, every leak and every warning of the decisions in the weeks beforehand, all the Chancellor and the Prime Minister were doing was confirming the weakness of their record and the destruction of the Conservative party's reputation, such as it was, for sound economic management. Try as it might, when a party have been in office for 12 years, there is no one left to blame.

Let me address directly the subject that has been at the heart of today's debate: the balance of global and national factors in all of this. Of course, the Chancellor tried desperately last week to claim it was all about global factors—a plea for the defence that was repeated yesterday by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in his opening speech. There is no doubt that the experience of covid and the consequences of Putin's invasion of

Ukraine have been very costly for many countries. All major countries have had to borrow money to help their businesses and to support their citizens—no one is denying that—but only in Britain, which is among the largest economies of the world, and under the stewardship of this Government, have we failed to recover our pre-covid economic position.

The Governor of the Bank of England last week described the difference between our recovery from covid and that of our peers as “dramatic”. The Office for Budget Responsibility’s report—it was allowed to issue one this time—suggests that it will be another two years before we even recover our pre-covid position. It is here in Britain, under this Government, that we had a mini-Budget resulting in carnage, causing a run on the pound, the IMF to hit the panic button, emergency interventions from the Bank of England and rocketing mortgage rates for our constituents. This country was used as a giant experiment by a Prime Minister and Chancellor desperate to enact the pamphlet fantasies of their dreams.

This month’s crop of Ministers—in today’s Tory party, everyone gets to be famous for 15 minutes—would like to tell us that it was all a bad dream and it fell from the sky, and they want to bury it under 10 feet of concrete, but it was a Conservative mini-Budget delivered by Conservative Ministers, voted in by Conservative party members and cheered on by Conservative MPs.

I have some of the quotes. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) said:

“I strongly welcome this radical and generous package of measures”.—[*Official Report*, 23 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 947.]

The hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) said:

“How refreshing it is to hear some Conservative policies at last.”—[*Official Report*, 23 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 950.]

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) said:

“I warmly welcome...the return to the low-tax free market principles that we on the Conservative Benches know will lead to growth and prosperity for everybody in our country.”—[*Official Report*, 23 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 954.]

The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) declared how “refreshing” it all was and said to us, “I am excited.” All of this was days before the whole thing drove the UK economy off a cliff.

Mark Fletcher: The right hon. Gentleman is having great fun, and the whole House is in raptures—please try to find my quotes in that pile; I do not think there are any. Not so long ago the Labour party was slugging us off for too many tax rises. We tried tax cuts and they did not work, and now he seems to be in the strange position of arguing with one hand and then with the other. What is the Labour party’s position when it comes to taxation?

Mr McFadden: I will tell the hon. Member one thing about taxation: the burden is much higher under this Government than it was under the Government in which I served as a Minister. That mini-Budget was a mistake for which the country and the public will be paying for a long time. In every one of the constituencies of Government Members, the two-year and five-year rates on mortgage renewals are still higher today than they were before that mini-Budget. Their constituents are still paying the price for their economic irresponsibility. Apart from the economic effects, it also caused damage

to the international standing of our country. We became a poster child for economic mismanagement—a point that the Prime Minister himself admitted at last week’s G20 summit in Bali.

But the failure is not just over 12 weeks; it is year on year. The UK economy’s growth has been consistently weaker than the OECD average, and that difference is now worth £10,000 per year for every household. We do have global pressures—no one denies them—but think how much stronger people would feel in facing today’s pressures if incomes had been that much higher. That is the ghost of growth past, and the forecast for the ghost of growth future is for the UK to be at the bottom of the OECD growth league, with the possible exception of Russia, for the next two years.

All of this is felt in people’s pockets. Income is set to decline by 7% in real terms over the next two years. That is a £1,700 per household reduction in spending power. Things people cannot buy, bills they cannot pay, places they cannot go, coping with worries they never previously had to think about—all of this is the price of lower incomes, and those lower incomes are the result of 12 years of anaemic economic growth. This is the Conservative party’s mess, and the British people are being asked to pay the bill.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury quoted Ronald Reagan in his opening speech yesterday, but there is another Reagan quote that should haunt the Government right now. He asked, “Are you better off than you were before?” and the answer is no. The Chancellor announced a series of tax rises, asking the British people to pay more, and he did so at a time when inflation is already making it harder to pay the bills.

What will the Government do to recover as much as possible of the estimated £6.7 billion lost to fraud and waste in the covid loan schemes? Why is the unit set up to chase that money, announced with great fanfare by the current Prime Minister and established in HMRC, being closed down? The Government’s own former fraud Minister described the controls as being like a “Dad’s Army operation” and said it was a “happy” time to be a crook, and still the Government are asking people to pay more. Should as much of that money as possible not be recovered before asking our constituents to pay more? What of the figure in the OBR report showing that the administration of the energy company Bulb will now cost the taxpayer £6.5 billion? Why is that cost to the public so huge? Is the Prime Minister really the hedge fund manager who forgot to hedge? Once again, the British people are being asked to pay the price.

The point of all this, according to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, is to restore financial stability, but the UK only needs to restore its financial stability because the Conservative party destroyed that financial stability. If that is all the Conservatives have to offer, then all they have to offer is managing decline. The weakness of the Prime Minister in trying to build a platform for growth was also laid bare in the autumn statement. They persist in a ban on onshore wind when the country urgently needs a transition to cleaner power in the interests of both our energy security and lower bills for consumers. They fight plans to build more houses—indeed, they might have to pull their own legislation on this—because Government Members always want

[Mr McFadden]

them elsewhere. The previous Prime Minister talked about an anti-growth coalition—it is sitting there on the Government Benches.

On trade, the Prime Minister wants to tell the European Union that the grown-ups are back in charge and, at the same time, convince his Back Benchers that he is really a true believer—well, good luck with that. The Chancellor, who loves all things Swiss, is going to buy them all cuckoo clocks for Christmas.

The point of financial stability is that it has to be a platform for better growth in the future. Financial stability has to be a platform for hope. It has to be the basis for wealth creation, for better long-term growth and for a way to escape the doom loop in which the Conservative party has left us. That is what we must secure to make the country more prosperous and our citizens better off.

This country can do so much better through the skills and talents of our workers; through modern supply-side economics that supports help to get the hundreds of thousands of people who have left the labour market since covid back into work, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) said in his opening speech yesterday; through making the transition to cleaner energy a UK industrial and economic success story; not through rerunning the Brexit argument, but by having an adult and responsible relationship with our neighbours and allies; through making this country the best place to start and grow a business—the home of enterprise and wealth creation; through the reform of business rates; and through making sure that when we get economic growth, every part of the country can be part of it.

The fundamental difference between Labour and the Conservatives is that they believe that growth comes only from unleashing the animal spirits at the top, while we believe that growth comes from the efforts of each and every person who goes to work every day, from the entrepreneurs who start a business to the teachers who equip children with new skills. That is the point of financial stability; it is not an end in itself but a platform for a better tomorrow. Maybe that is the lasting verdict on this autumn statement: it was an admission that not only have the Conservatives failed in the past but they now have nothing to offer for the future.

6.36 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins):

It is a pleasure to be at the Dispatch Box to respond to the many powerful and passionate contributions made by my right hon. and hon. Friends and the sometimes incorrect contributions made by other hon. Members, and it is a genuine privilege to wind up on behalf of the Government in support of the autumn statement. We have discussed and debated many aspects of the autumn statement. We have heard some passionate and clear analyses of the situation in our constituencies as well as nationally and internationally, and of the state of the economy at home and around the world.

The autumn statement sets out our ambitions for stability, growth and public services. We say that it is a balanced plan: on the one hand, it will strengthen our public finances, bring down inflation and protect jobs,

and on the other hand, it will protect standards in schools, cut NHS waiting times, fund social care, cap energy bills and support those on benefits. We have been frank, however, that that has been difficult. We as a Government are prepared to take those decisions in the country's best interests. There is no question but that these are challenging times, but neither the origins nor the impacts are unique to this country.

To correct some Opposition Members, the independent Office for Budget Responsibility has said that the fall in living standards is almost entirely driven by rising world prices. We can see the evidence in the international figures. Inflation is high here, but it is higher in Germany, the Netherlands and Italy. My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) explained the terrible impacts that inflation can have and my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) made the critical point that inflation hurts the poorest the most. That is precisely why the Government's No. 1 priority is to tackle inflation.

Interest rates have risen here, but they have risen more quickly in the United States, Canada and New Zealand. My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) reminded the House that the Governor of the Bank of the England gave evidence to the Treasury Committee this week and said that the disruption in the mortgage market caused by the mini-Budget had subsided—indeed, that it subsided in mid to late October. I am grateful to her for that reminder.

Growth forecasts have fallen here, but they have also fallen elsewhere in the world, including falling further in Germany. The OBR says that higher energy prices explain the majority of the downward revision in cumulative growth since March. Governments do not have the luxury of choosing the context in which they must operate. Indeed, the IMF expects one third of the world's economy to be in recession this year and next. The job is to understand what we face, address those issues deliberately and responsibly on behalf of the communities we serve and then deliver that action, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does the Minister agree with me that the measures set out in the statement and under discussion over these last few days will mean that, when the international economy and our own start to improve, we will be in a far better place to reap the benefits of that global economic improvement than if we were just to sit here, twiddle our thumbs and pretend that everything was okay?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, the OBR—the independent OBR—again confirms that because of our plans the recession is shallower, and inflation is reduced because of these very difficult decisions we have taken. Unemployment is also lower, with about 70,000 jobs protected as a result of our decisions.

Drew Hendry: The Minister is very keen to lay inflationary pressures globally, but how does she explain the OECD figures showing that, for market interest rates, the UK is at the very top of the tree?

Victoria Atkins: As the Governor of the Bank of England has explained, disruption in the markets has subsided, and the impact of that has flushed through

the system. I would emphasise to the hon. Member the evidence we are seeing in other countries. I do not shy away from that; I offer it as an example of the pressures we are all facing internationally. It is precisely that international picture that the Government are addressing.

The hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) laid down in, if I may say so, a rather loud speech that there was no help for his constituents with the cost of living. It was passionate, I am told. It is fair to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) expressed astonishment at his passion, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) said that some Opposition Members were living in a different galaxy.

On a serious note, I do want to help colleagues across the House understand the help that is available, because I know that hon. Members will be responding to their constituents' worries. Any constituent who is on benefits or paid pensions will have them increased by 10.1%. Any constituent on means-tested benefits will have a one-off payment of £900. Any constituent on pension credit will have a one-off payment of £300 on top of their winter payment, and those who are living with disabilities will have a one-off payment of £150. Any constituent on the national living wage will see an increase to their salary, with the hourly rate going up to £10.42. Every single one of our constituents will see help through the energy price guarantee, which is worth on average £900 this year and will be worth £500 next year, and it helps to lower inflation by 2%.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: I will give way, but there is even more to come.

What is more—and his is an important point in relation to the very moving cases we have heard in the House today—the most vulnerable households will be able to secure help through the household support scheme, to which we have added a further £1 billion precisely to help those who are in trouble. I know that hon. Members from Northern Ireland are most concerned about people living off-grid. We have doubled the one-off payment that will be given to people living off the grid, and that payment will be given in the winter. Finally, if anyone is in any doubt as to the help they can give their constituents, they should please look at the “Help for Households” website, which sets this all out very clearly.

I am now going to race through some of the changes that we have had to make to taxes. We have tried to be fair and compassionate in these difficult times, meaning that those with the broadest shoulders bear the heaviest weights, and we have wanted to avoid tax rises that most damage growth. On personal taxes, we have reduced the threshold at which the 45p rate becomes payable from £150,000 to £125,140, which means that those earning £150,000 will pay just over £1,200 more in tax each year. We are maintaining the income tax personal allowance and thresholds, which is a difficult but necessary decision, but even after these freezes, we will still have the most generous set of tax-free allowances of any G7 country.

On business taxes, we are raising corporation tax to 25p precisely because, as has been said, we want the largest companies to bear their responsibility. Even at the increased rate of 25%, it will still be the lowest rate of corporation tax in the G7. We have frozen the employer national insurance contribution threshold until

April 2028, but 40% of businesses will still pay no NICs at all. The VAT registration threshold will stay which, incidentally, is almost twice as high as EU and OECD averages.

Jonathan Gullis *rose—*

Carla Lockhart *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: Let me move on to business rates, and then I will come to my hon. Friend and the hon. Lady. We know how important business rates are for our high streets, pubs, shops, and local hospitality businesses. That is why with the revaluation that is needed, we have none the less got a package of nearly £14 billion-worth of help, so that nearly two thirds of properties will not pay a penny next year, and thousands of pubs, restaurants and small high-street shops will benefit.

Jonathan Gullis: The Minister is talking about taxation. I am seriously concerned that the Government have enabled council tax to go up by 5%. In Stoke-on-Trent a 1% rise brings in merely £900,000, which is the second lowest of any local authority in England, and it simply will not cover the black hole that inflation has brought. Will the Government look at areas such as Stoke-on-Trent and give additional help? If they do not, we will end up in the situation that Croydon Council has just announced: the third time it has gone bankrupt.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend. For anyone who missed it, I think he just said that Croydon Council has gone bankrupt for a third time, which is worrying, given that it is, I think, a Labour council. He mentioned the council tax referendums, and we chose that course precisely because we want to address the very real issue of social care. We have ensured that we are balancing those pressures with grants from central Government, and I will come to that in a little more detail in a moment.

Labour's answer to these difficult sets of international and domestic problems seems, as has been pointed out, to be non-doms. Labour says that scrapping non-doms will apparently earn £3 billion in savings. Well, here are some facts. Non-domiciled taxpayers were liable to pay £7.9 billion in UK income tax, capital gains tax, and national insurance contributions in the tax year ending 2021. Non-doms have invested more than £6 billion in the UK since 2012, using the business investment relief scheme. In other words, non-doms are paying rates of tax that far outstrip the savings that Labour would make, and it is a very one-dimensional answer to a difficult problem.

Carla Lockhart *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: I give way to the hon. Lady.

Carla Lockhart: Persistence has worked. I am sure the Minister will welcome the increase from £100 to £200 for the heating oil payment in Northern Ireland, and that it will go to all households. However, for weeks now £400 has been dangled in front of the people of Northern Ireland for the energy support payment. Can she assure my hard-pressed constituents that they will get their £400, and can she say when they will get it?

Victoria Atkins: I have been nudged by the Whips, so would the hon. Lady allow me to write to her? I know how complicated it is in Northern Ireland.

[Victoria Atkins]

I could talk about growth. Interestingly, Conservative Members were talking about growth and about how we can ensure the future of our economy for our children and grandchildren. I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friends the Members for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), and for North Somerset (Dr Fox), and to my hon. Friends the Members for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell), for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton). They all emphasised how vital growth is if we are to get through these difficult issues and build a good and rich economy for us all.

We announced in the autumn statement some interesting and important measures, including safeguarding capital investment over the next five years, so that we have the largest investment in public works for more than four decades. Of course, innovation and education will be critical, which is why, next year and the year after, we will invest an extra £2.3 billion a year in schools.

On health, because we know how important it is to each and every one of our constituents, despite the very difficult times that we are in, we are providing £6.6 billion to the NHS over the next two years. We will be providing an estimated 200,000 more social care packages for the elderly and most vulnerable in our society, because we are increasing funding in these very difficult times.

We have had to take tough decisions now to lay the foundations for our economy for the next generation. We will not pass on our debts to our children and grandchildren, but we will provide education, skills and prosperity in the industries of the future. We are facing tough times, but we will rise again with a thriving economy, high employment and a bright, responsible economic future for us all. I commend the statement, but it also commends itself to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The amazing influence of the Whips—sometimes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That—

- (a) provision may be made increasing the rate at which energy (oil and gas) profits levy is charged to 35%,
- (b) provision may be made reducing the percentage in section 2(3) of the Energy (Oil and Gas) Profits Levy Act 2022 (amount of additional investment expenditure) to 29%, and
- (c) (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made for and in connection with extending the period for which the levy has effect until 31 March 2028.

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of the motions made in the name of the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Standing Order No. 51(3)).

2. AMOUNT OF CORPORATION TAX RELIEF FOR EXPENDITURE ON RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made—

- (a) increasing the percentage in section 104M(3) of the Corporation Tax Act 2009 to 20%, Friday 18 November 2022 OP No.73: Part 2 A. Calendar of Business 11
- (b) reducing the percentage in section 1044(8) of that Act to 86%,
- (c) reducing the percentages in sections 1045(7) and 1055(2)(b) of that Act to 186%, and
- (d) reducing the percentage in section 1058(1)(a) of that Act to 10%.

3. BASIC RATE LIMIT AND PERSONAL ALLOWANCE FOR TAX YEARS 2026-27 AND 2027-28

Question put,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made for each of the following amounts to remain at their current amounts for the tax years 2026-27 and 2027-28—

- (a) the amount specified in section 10(5) of the Income Tax Act 2007 (basic rate limit), and
- (b) the amount specified in section 35(1) of that Act (personal allowance).

The House divided: Ayes 318, Noes 223.

Division No. 94]

[6.51 pm

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel	Buchan, Felicity
Afolami, Bim	Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Afriyie, Adam	Burghart, Alex
Aiken, Nickie	Butler, Rob
Aldous, Peter	Cairns, rh Alun
Anderson, Lee	Carter, Andy
Anderson, Stuart	Cartlidge, James
Andrew, rh Stuart	Cash, Sir William
Ansell, Caroline	Cates, Miriam
Argar, rh Edward	Caulfield, Maria
Atkins, Victoria	Chalk, Alex
Bacon, Gareth	Chishti, Rehman
Bacon, Mr Richard	Chope, Sir Christopher
Badenoch, rh Kemi	Churchill, Jo
Bailey, Shaun	Clark, rh Greg
Baillie, Siobhan	Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Baker, Duncan	Clarke, Theo (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marcus Jones</i>)
Baker, Mr Steve	Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Baldwin, Harriett	Clarkson, Chris
Barclay, rh Steve	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Baron, Mr John	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Baynes, Simon	Colburn, Elliot
Bell, Aaron	Collins, Damian
Benton, Scott	Costa, Alberto
Beresford, Sir Paul	Courts, Robert
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Coutinho, Claire
Bhatti, Saqib	Crabb, rh Stephen
Blackman, Bob	Crosbie, Virginia
Blunt, Crispin	Crouch, Tracey
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Daly, James
Bowie, Andrew	Davies, rh David T. C.
Bradley, Ben	Davies, Gareth
Bradley, rh Karen	Davies, Dr James
Brady, Sir Graham	Davies, Mims
Braverman, rh Suella	Davis, rh Mr David
Brereton, Jack	Davison, Dehenna
Bridgen, Andrew	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Brine, Steve	Dines, Miss Sarah
Bristow, Paul	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Britcliffe, Sara	Docherty, Leo
Browne, Anthony	Donelan, rh Michelle
Bruce, Fiona	

Dorries, rh Ms Nadine
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel

Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Marcus Jones*)
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill

Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Solloway, Amanda

Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Symms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Ayes:

Mike Wood and
 Steve Double

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas

Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie

Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Flynn, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Girvan, Paul
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren

Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim

Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen

Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Colleen Fletcher and
 Navendu Mishra

Question accordingly agreed to.

4. THRESHOLD AT WHICH ADDITIONAL RATE OF INCOME TAX IS CHARGED

Resolved,

That provision may be made reducing the amount of the higher rate limit in section 10 of the Income Tax Act 2007 so that it is equal to—

- (a) twice the amount specified in subsection (1) of section 35 of that Act (personal allowance) for a tax year, plus
- (b) the amount specified in subsection (2) of that section (amount at which personal allowance starts to be withdrawn).

5. DIVIDEND NIL RATE

Resolved,

That provision may be made reducing the amount by reference to which income is charged at the dividend nil rate (currently £2,000) so that it applies by reference to—

- (a) £1,000 for the tax year 2023-24, and
- (b) £500 for the tax year 2024-25 and subsequent tax years.

6. CAPITAL GAINS TAX (ANNUAL EXEMPT AMOUNT)

Resolved,

That provision may be made—

- (a) amending section 1K(2) of the Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992 so that the annual exempt amount is reduced to £6,000 for the tax year 2023-24 and is further reduced to £3,000 for the tax year 2024-25 and subsequent tax years,
- (b) repealing section 1L of that Act (increasing the annual exempt amount to reflect increases in CPI), and
- (c) amending section 8C(1)(b) of the Taxes Management Act 1970 (returns so far as relating to capital gains tax).

7. INHERITANCE TAX (NIL RATE BAND ETC FOR TAX YEARS 2026-27 AND 2027-28)

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made amending section 86 of the Finance Act 2021 so that the nil rate band, the residential enhancement and the taper threshold remain at their current amounts for the tax years 2026-27 and 2027-28.

8. REMOVAL OF VEHICLE EXCISE DUTY EXEMPTIONS AND RELIEFS

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made for and in connection with removing exemptions or other reliefs from vehicle excise duty, with effect for licences taken out on or after 1 April 2025, in respect of—

- (a) electrically propelled vehicles that are light passenger vehicles, light goods vehicles or motorcycles,
- (b) light passenger vehicles that have low CO₂ emissions, and
- (c) light passenger vehicles that are hybrid vehicles or that use road fuel gas.

9. TAXABLE BENEFITS (APPROPRIATE PERCENTAGE FOR CARS WITH A CO₂ EMISSIONS FIGURE)

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made amending section 139 of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003 to increase the appropriate percentages for cars with a CO₂ emissions figure by no more than 1% in each of the tax years 2025-26, 2026-27 and 2027-28.

FINANCE: MONEY

King's recommendation signified.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act of the present Session relating to finance, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of sums incurred by the Commissioners for His Majesty's Revenue and Customs which is attributable to the increase in the percentage in section 104M(3) of the Corporation Tax Act 2009 to 20%.

Ordered,

That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, John Glen, Victoria Atkins, Andrew Griffith and James Cartlidge bring in the Bill.

FINANCE BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Victoria Atkins accordingly presented a Bill to grant certain duties, to alter other duties, and to amend the law relating to the national debt and the public revenue, and to make further provision in connection with finance.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 197) with explanatory notes (Bill 197—EN).

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 4 to 15 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

That the draft Cessation of EU Law Relating to Prohibitions on Grounds of Nationality and Free Movement of Persons Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 20 October, be approved.

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 (Offensive Weapons Homicide Reviews) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 13 October, be approved.

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration Skills Charge (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 17 October, be approved.

SANCTIONS

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 16) Regulations 2022 (SI 2022, No. 1122), dated 1 November 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 3 November, be approved.

ENERGY

That the Energy Bill Relief Scheme Pass-through Requirement (Heat Suppliers) (England and Wales and Scotland) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 1101), dated 27 October 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 31 October, be approved.

That the Energy Bills Support Scheme and Energy Price Guarantee Pass-through Requirement (England and Wales and Scotland) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 1102), dated 27 October 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 31 October, be approved.

That the Energy Bill Relief Scheme Pass-through Requirement (England and Wales and Scotland) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 1103), dated 27 October 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 31 October, be approved.

That the Energy Bill Relief Scheme Pass-through Requirement (Heat Suppliers) (Northern Ireland) Regulations (SI, 2022, No. 1124), dated 3 November 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 4 November, be approved.

That the Energy Bill Relief Scheme and Energy Price Guarantee Pass-through Requirement and Miscellaneous Amendments Regulations (SI, 2022, No. 1125), dated 3 November 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 4 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION)

That the draft Persistent Organic Pollutants (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 19 October, be approved.

DEFENCE

That the draft Armed Forces (Tri-Service Serious Crime Unit) (Consequential Amendments) (No. 2) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 17 October, be approved.

That the draft Armed Forces (Court Martial) (Amendment) Rules 2022, which were laid before this House on 17 October, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

Service Personnel and Veterans: Rehabilitation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

7.9 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to discuss in this House the rehabilitation of injured and sick service personnel and veterans. The people of our constituencies and of this country send us to this Chamber to represent them, but all too often what we discuss on these Benches seems a million miles away from the realities of those we seek to serve. We talk about the overview of massive nationwide schemes and about budgets in the tens of millions. We find ourselves talking about people as statistics—the percentage who need x, the numbers who have used y. It is only right that we talk about the big picture and the huge issues that this country faces, but I would like to use this opportunity to talk about some of the people we seek to serve: those who have served us and their country.

It is particularly poignant to speak in this House about the rehabilitation of veterans and service personnel in the week following Remembrance Sunday, when Members across the House attended services in honour of those who have given their lives in service. It is important that we all recognise that remembrance is not simply about familiar symbols and services over a few days in November, but about remembering those we have lost, honouring them by doing what we can to support the living, and recognising the reality of their lives.

Last year, I was honoured to be invited to join the armed forces parliamentary scheme. The scheme aims to give Members of Parliament like me, with no experience of serving in the armed forces, an insight into military life. I had zero insight into that world until I took part in the scheme with the Royal Navy and with Royal Marine commandos. Along with some unforgettable experiences, I had the chance to meet service personnel from all walks of life, hear from them about their experiences, see them training and see them in the field. I actually bumped into ex-pupils from the last 20 years of my teaching career, which was quite the occasion.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate; I spoke to her beforehand. I fully support what she is saying and what she means. A charity in my constituency called Beyond the Battlefield offers rehabilitation for service personnel and veterans and ensures that their wellbeing is taken into consideration. As well as rehab, it offers incredible mental health support and temporary shelter while veterans get back on their feet.

In Northern Ireland, housing priority has not yet been extended to service personnel, so they are often left in housing need if they become ill or injured. Does the hon. Lady agree that a more in-depth discussion is needed to ensure that veterans are protected through priority housing if they become ill or injured while in service or out of service?

Tonia Antoniazzi: It is really important that we continue to have the conversation about housing needs, particularly in Northern Ireland, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

I would like to continue to have that conversation with him outside the Chamber in my role as shadow Minister for Northern Ireland. I thank him for his intervention.

One thing that struck me about my experience in the armed forces parliamentary scheme was that there is no standard military job. The diversity of experiences and skills, and of people, was striking.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing today's debate; I commend what she says. In my constituency, there are many retired Gurkha soldiers. Unfortunately, those who retired before 1997 receive a much lower pension than other colleagues in the British Army. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is very important for Ministers to listen to the issues raised by the Gurkhas? Does she also agree that it is incumbent on Ministers to continue discussions with the Nepalese Government and bring them to a fruitful conclusion?

Tonia Antoniazzi: My hon. Friend is right. It is important that the conversation about pensions with the Nepalese Government continues and that he speaks to the Minister and the Secretary of State about it.

Perhaps those in civilian life, like many of us in this House, too often view the armed forces as one homogeneous group. They may have one image of the type of person who enters the forces, or an idea of military life that bears more relation to a Sunday afternoon film than to reality. It is essential that we in this House do not make the same mistake. We must acknowledge both individual needs and the unique position of those who serve and have served as they transition into civilian life, and we need to ensure that the specialised services that support them are well funded and supported to grow.

These include organisations such as the British Training Board, whose goal is to make sure that the training and skills achieved in the armed forces are recognised by civilian employers. It was set up by an Army veteran, Adrian Rabey, who on leaving the service found that the skills he had gained as a teacher and trainer were not recognised by employers, despite having been told the opposite when he was in the Army. A few years later he began to see friends in a similar position and started to work with them and looking at gaps in their qualifications, and he realised that the prior learning they had undertaken in the military was not being recognised. Since then, fantastic work has been going on and the British Training Board has successfully helped thousands of serving and ex-military personnel to get recognition for their previous military and public services training and experience, and it has grown to offering career development, coaching and support, which I have seen at first hand. This is a specialist service for a unique set of people, but we cannot rely on people like Adrian alone to fulfil our obligations to veterans.

In 2011 the country made a promise, founded on the unique obligations and sacrifices of those who serve or have served in the armed forces, that they and their families should be treated fairly. The armed forces covenant is in place because we recognised the unique nature of the service given to this country by those in the forces.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for bringing forward this important issue. We have had a number of conflicts since the Falklands

in 1982, including the Gulf war, Iraq and Afghanistan, and of course 30 years of troubles and violence in Northern Ireland. Our service personnel served with distinction, with many paying the ultimate sacrifice and others being left with mental and physical scars. Does she agree that, in Northern Ireland specifically, the continual glorification of terrorism is inhibiting the rehabilitation and wellness of our ex-service personnel? We have political leaders saying that it was justified and that there was no alternative, but if we continue to hear language like that our service personnel will never be rehabilitated and will continue to be retraumatised.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I would like to have a discussion about the glorification of terrorism with her outside the Chamber, and I thank her for raising it and putting it on the record.

We must recognise that everyone's experiences and sacrifices are unique, and that the nature of the support they receive must reflect that. I commend the Government for acknowledging the need for targeted and specialist support through the introduction of the armed forces personnel in transition framework, which should ensure that seriously wounded armed forces personnel with very complex and enduring healthcare requirements who are transitioning into civilian life will continue to receive comprehensive support throughout their lifetime, although I and others would welcome assurances from the Government that integrated personal commissioning for veterans is being implemented effectively.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on an excellent speech. I am particularly pleased that she has mentioned the integrated personal commissioning for veterans scheme—IPC4V—which I know was set up with veterans such as Ben Parkinson in mind. Ben Parkinson is a hero and I have been in regular contact with him and his family for a number of years. I am concerned that worries have been expressed recently about whether Ministry of Defence funding is still in place to enable charities to provide the vital services that veterans like Ben need, as was the case previously. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must ensure that those veterans' needs are always met? Soldiers like Ben Parkinson have done their duty to our country, and we must do our duty to them by ensuring that they get the treatment they need for the duration of their lives.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. It is essential that that funding is there from the MOD, and I would like to work with him on this. I am sure that the Minister will do so as well.

I said at the start of this contribution that I wanted to talk about people, and I want to talk about a few of the people I have come to know and about their journeys, because it is important that their stories should be heard from these green Benches. I want to tell the House about Pete and the impact that his ambition has had, not just on him but on the support that service people and veterans like him are now able to access through a phenomenal organisation that I have been lucky enough to work with called 65 Degrees North.

Pete Bowker was a lance corporal in the Queen's Dragoon Guards. When on tour in Afghanistan, the armoured vehicle in which he was traveling was hit by an improvised explosive device. As a result of the blast, Pete lost his right leg below the knee and was discharged

in 2012. In 2015, Pete became the world's first amputee to cross the Greenland ice cap unsupported. Pete was assisted by a team put together by the formidable Richard Morgan, a former Royal Marines commando. When Rich met Pete—that sounds like a film, doesn't it?—in 2013, as part of a team taking part in a 10-day endurance challenge to raise money for wounded, injured and sick servicemen and women, Pete told Rich about his ambition to cross the Greenland ice cap and how he had struggled to get support for it, so Rich decided to help him, because that is what Rich is like. Even when he discovered that Pete did not know how to ski—imagine that!—which is pretty important for someone trying to get across Greenland, he still carried on.

The expedition to Greenland not only fulfilled Pete's ambition; it started something bigger. Seeing the impact of the Greenland expedition, the team behind it saw the potential for adventure in rehabilitation, which is how 65 Degrees North began. In the years since, 65 Degrees North has helped more than 100 wounded, injured and sick service personnel and veterans realise their ambitions. Offering this community the opportunity to participate in challenging, unique and, honestly, arduous expeditions, which I do not think I could achieve, supports them to regain their confidence, change their behaviours and tackle PTSD by offering a form of participation centred on rehabilitation in which outcomes are clear, tangible and empowering—that is the word.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): The message is very clear, that service and inspiration does not stop when these individuals leave the armed forces; in some cases, it only begins. My constituent Andy Reid, from Rainford, last month became the first triple amputee from the UK to reach the summit of Kilimanjaro. After being injured in Afghanistan more than a decade ago, Andy set up the Standing Tall Foundation in St Helens. It is not just about helping veterans and those he served alongside; it is open to everyone in the town and borough. People like Andy continue to be an inspiration to this very day, and we should have them in mind in this debate.

Tonia Antoniazzi: That is absolutely brilliant. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, because constituents like Andy need to know about and participate in such activities. It is all-encompassing.

Listening to the testimonies of those who have taken part in such activities, it is clear that real-life feedback and learning, where they are asked to deal with new situations and to adapt to constantly changing conditions, gives them confidence and helps them to recapture parts of themselves that they felt were lost because of their injury and experience.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of this approach is how it helps participants to challenge their perceptions of themselves. The research shows that cognitive dissonance has been created between a person's perceived abilities and their actual behaviours, and it is summed up so well in the words of Zoe, a Royal Navy lieutenant:

"The first time I walked in the door, we had a really nice talk about how the whole idea was to get people outside, build some confidence. It is one of those moments where everyone kind of comes together and says, 'You said you couldn't do that and now look at you—you can do it.' Pulling my head away from, 'It hurts, you can't do this. You haven't been able to walk, let alone climb' to climbing up a ridge that Royal Marine commandos use to train on the rock weekly essentially obliterated it, because I had no choice. It was like, 'You're going to give this a go.'"

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

When talking to people who have been involved, it is clear how this approach impacts positively on their mental health and wellbeing, and helps change lives for the better. There is no cure-all for PTSD or the other issues that these participants face, but there is clearly a need for tailored support and space for different therapeutic approaches as part of a holistic support model.

I would like to end—I say that, but I am not going to end soon, so do not get excited—with the words of the wife of one of the 65 Degrees North participants, who sums up not only the struggle that far too many service personnel, veterans and their families face when they need support, but the impact that is made when they receive it. We must not forget the families and the partners of our service personnel. She says:

“When Mark first told me about wanting to climb Kilimanjaro with 65 Degrees North I was very wary and I will admit now that I was cynical.

PTSD seems to be the new “trendy” charity cause that people want to be involved in, only to have them let you down. You would not believe the charities we both approached for help, only to find out that it was either not there, not in our area or we didn’t tick the right box to be entitled to help.

I remember the day I was crying down the phone to a certain PTSD forces charity, begging for them to help him, to be told as he is now working in the careers service he isn’t classed as serving in their eyes! So I was told there was nothing they could do, but when I then asked a charity that dealt with veterans, yep you guessed it, they classed him as still serving, so we just slipped through the cracks. I had to watch this man, who had given 28 years of his life, who sacrificed so much, be cast aside by these people, all because he didn’t quite meet their criteria.

So we tried the GP...who had no clue how to help.

After hours and hours of researching I did find someone who was willing to help and it did help...for a short time.

Unfortunately they didn’t seem to realise that PTSD isn’t like a cold, you don’t wake up and suddenly be cured. So PTSD was back...with a vengeance.

So yes, I was doubtful, cynical and feeling very protective that Mark would yet again be failed and let down. But I smiled, told him whatever he wanted to do I’d support him and just thought I’d have to pick up the pieces later. So our weekends became filled with mountain walks, treks up to Pen Y Fan (I actually had frost bite at one point and didn’t I complain).

Time quickly passed and it was time for him to leave...but he didn’t want to go. Fear of failure (like that would ever happen...We are talking bootneck stubbornness here) what if he didn’t like anyone? What if they didn’t like him? What if he got injured? What if? So I dropped him off and told him he’d be fine and did the thing every forces partner does... waited and worried.

But something happened, each time he was able to get in touch he sounded a bit different, calmer, stronger, positive and proud, feelings that PTSD takes from you. There were dark times, times he said he didn’t think he would make it. but he did... he conquered Kili and in doing so took the biggest leap towards a life (dare I say it) free from PTSD.

There are no words I can use to describe the change in Mark since his return, for the first time we can both see there is light at the end of this long, dark PTSD tunnel. That we aren’t alone, there are actually people out there who not only care, but are willing to help and continue to help.

So yes, I was wrong (hey, it doesn’t happen very often)” — good woman—

“becoming involved with 65 Degrees North was one of the best things Mark has done for himself and for us. If anyone has the chance to help and get involved with them then please grab that opportunity. I promise you, it will change your life.”

I have brought up this charity with the Minister and he has agreed to meet people from it. I am very thankful for that and will arrange for that meeting to happen. I have been honoured to be able to stand in this House and talk about the experiences of soldiers and of these two charities that support our servicemen and women, and veterans, with dignity. For me, “dignity” is the key word.

I also wish to put on record, from my experience and from those of other Members who have been part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, how unique and brilliant that scheme is. It has changed my whole outlook as a Member of Parliament. It is what should be rolled out for all parliamentarians and all their staff as a matter of course, because it is incredible.

I pay tribute to the excellent work of Commander Susie Moran from the Royal Navy and Lieutenant Johnny Longbottom, who supported my journey through the scheme, which was entertaining. It also helped this Member of Parliament for Gower, in Swansea, south Wales to gain a greater insight into the challenges of our current service personnel and a better understanding of the needs and the rehabilitation of injured and sick service personnel and veterans. I take this opportunity to thank the Minister for his comments, which will be coming, and to thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

7.30 pm

The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): I thank the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for her contribution this evening. She has raised a number of issues. I think there is a great deal of common ground, and I salute her for all her efforts in promoting the welfare of the men and women of our armed forces, our veterans and, in particular, those who require the services of our rehabilitation services.

There is, of course, a raft of support available to our personnel, rightly, to veterans and to their families. In the short time that I have available to me, I will try to outline, in response to the hon. Lady’s comments, some of those as best I can.

Let me start by summarising our rehabilitation offer for serving personnel. Our aim here is to return our regulars and our reserves to active duty as soon as possible. To that end, the MOD’s Defence Medical Services, which I used to be a part of, provides a tiered service, extending from the more minor to the most severe injuries.

First, our primary care rehabilitation facilities offer physiotherapy and exercise rehabilitation—fairly straightforward things. Should additional clinical decision making and diagnostics be required, referral to one of the 13 regional rehabilitation units across the UK is possible. They offer rapid access to imaging services and residential rehabilitation for those with moderate musculoskeletal injuries. When it comes to complex musculoskeletal disorders, complex trauma and issues related to joint and soft tissue disease, patients are transferred to the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre in Stanford Hall—known to many hon. and right hon. Members as its previous incarnation, Headley Court in Surrey. DMRC also supports small groups of veterans who require prosthetics through its complex prosthetic assessment clinic.

Since May 2020, a total of 16 patients have attended this service and, since March 2022, eight veterans have undergone cutting-edge direct skeletal fixation surgery for prosthesis before receiving rehabilitation at DMRC.

Notably, this clinic is a joint MOD and NHS England endeavour, highlighting how partnership is a key feature of our military healthcare landscape these days.

Another example of this partnership is our defence recovery capability. This MOD-led initiative is run in conjunction with Help for Heroes, the Royal British Legion and Erskine Homes. The care it provides is centred around an individual recovery plan, integrating all aspects of recovery, including medical care, welfare, housing, education, reskilling, work placements and employment issues.

Again, those with more serious conditions can access one of our specialist regional personnel recovery units, receiving one-to-one support from a personnel recovery officer. In our major garrisons, there are personnel recovery centres, such as the naval service recovery centre in Plymouth. I should be clear that these are not hospitals, rehabilitation or physiotherapy centres, but conducive military environments designed to speed up recovery. Indeed, they provide not just residential capacity, but specially designed courses and, in the case of the Battle Back Centre at Lilleshall, adaptive support and adventure training to rebuild confidence shattered by trauma, which touches on the hon. Lady's oral question to me on 7 November.

Hon. Members will be aware that, unfortunately, the impact of covid-19 precipitated Help for Heroes' withdrawal from the PRCs in Colchester, Catterick, Tidworth and the NSRC in Plymouth in 2021. However, I reassure colleagues that the MOD has since stepped in to take ownership of these recovery centres and will continue to operate alongside the Royal British Legion and Erskine Homes for the Battle Back Centre and Edinburgh PRC.

I briefly turn to the rehabilitation that we offer to veterans, which is the second part of the hon. Lady's Adjournment debate today. As of 1 July 2022, some 3% of the UK regular trained armed forces were in recovery, while some 70% seen in recovery returned to duty. The medical care our people receive is world class but, inevitably, not all who receive support can return to work. Nevertheless, we retain a duty of care to all veterans who selflessly serve our nation. The offer begins with our career transition partnership, which plays a critical role in smoothing the transition from military to civilian life. The full core resettlement programme is available to all medically discharged service leavers regardless of service length and is accessible to personnel two years prior to and two years after discharge.

There is also a bespoke service, known as CTP Assist, for the most vulnerable leavers, which is tailored to the individual needs of the client. Hon. Members will be aware that, in the past, service veterans received variable levels of support due to a complex, overlapping patchwork of provision.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I appreciate the information the Minister is giving us. On the point about training, is the training subject to any kind of review or standards, such as Ofsted?

Dr Murrison: What we do in Defence is probably world-beating—I would like to think so—but Ofsted is involved in assessing training throughout Defence, including in phase 1 and phase 2 establishments. In general, Ofsted's

reviews have been pretty positive, and I am more than happy to share them with the hon. Lady if she would like me to.

I could not possibly conclude a debate such as this without mentioning Operation Courage. Launched in April 2019, the service helps veterans to recover from the hidden harms that conflict inflicts on mind and body. I know the hon. Lady is well aware of that.

Alongside Op Courage is our veteran trauma network, which offers veterans support for service-related physical healthcare problems. The network comprises 18 NHS veteran trauma centres and NHS specialist units, each with its own military and civilian expertise. I accept that that is not enough, and we are working on more to come, in particular a £5 million research fund. This area is a fruitful one for further research to improve the offer we are able to make to our servicepeople and veterans, and in particular to develop innovative surgical techniques, improve rehabilitation from blast injuries and adapt intervention technologies for mild traumatic brain injury, among other things.

I must briefly mention the creation of the National Rehabilitation Centre, which is very exciting. Working alongside the national health service, it will be a 70-bed specialist clinic unit bringing patient care, research, and training and education under one roof. I pay tribute to the former vice-chief of the defence staff, General Sir Tim Granville-Chapman, for his work in that area. I look forward to the NRC's opening formally in 2024, but in the meantime there is much collaboration between the DMRC and the NRC.

On the point the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) made about IPC4V, he seemed to suggest it was going to be closed down or downgraded, but I can assure him that is not the case. It was only launched in March 2019. He is right to mention Ben Parkinson as an exemplar, and I can reassure him about our commitment to it; we are even scoping extending the reach of the scheme, if that is of any help to him. I am more than happy to discuss the matter with him further.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the Minister for the response he has just provided. I know he takes these matters very seriously. Does he recall seeing an important piece in *The Sunday Times* a couple of months ago, written by David Collins, which raised specific concerns about the support provided to the most seriously injured veterans? I wrote to his predecessor about it and would obviously be very happy to write to him about it too. I just ask him to look at the points flagged in that article and satisfy himself that the necessary provision is in place for people such as Ben Parkinson.

Dr Murrison: I do not recognise the piece of correspondence that the hon. Gentleman describes, but I will ask for it to be presented to me and I will certainly be more than happy to discuss it with him.

Finally, we will strive to make this place the best in the world to be a veteran while offering the gold standard in rehabilitation services for all those who serve. When the call came, they answered. In their hour of need we must do the same.

Question put and agreed to.

7.39 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 22 November 2022

[SIR ROBERT SYMS *in the Chair*]

UK Canals and Waterways

9.30 am

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the UK's canals and waterways.

It is a pleasure to be here this morning, particularly under your chairmanship, Sir Robert, or should I say chairship nowadays? I am not sure.

Last Saturday, I had a pleasant day walking with a colleague along the Coventry canal and the Trent and Mersey canal, where they intersect at Fradley junction in my constituency of Lichfield. Nothing can be more glorious than sitting outside the Mucky Duck pub, whose real name is the Swan, which is at that intersection, to look at the swans, the geese, the ducks and the narrowboats manoeuvring through the locks.

Before covid, I had a very different experience on the Chesapeake and Ohio canal when I went on a narrowboat along the 4 miles in Washington DC—in Georgetown, actually—where it is navigable. The rest is derelict. A couple of national park rangers, whose National Park Service administers the canal, told me that they were saving all their cash to hire a narrowboat and have a canal holiday in the UK. As one said to me, and I shall perform in my American accent, if the House will forgive me, “You guys just don’t know how lucky you are having thousands of miles of canals. You just don’t realise how loved something is until it’s gone.”

The number of colleagues in Westminster Hall today is a testament to how important our canal system is to all of us and to our constituencies. Our canal system is not just for narrowboaters; it is for those who enjoy the tranquillity of walking along canal towpaths and watching the wildlife that thrives there. For that reason, I am most grateful to have been granted this important debate on the future of the UK's canals and waterways. The need to secure their future is, I am afraid, a matter of increasing urgency.

The nation's extensive network of canals and waterways runs through around half of all constituencies, so I have no doubt that the House appreciates what a wonderful national treasure our waterways network is. I have more than 20 miles of canal in my constituency, as well as an active canal restoration society, the Lichfield and Hatherton Canals Restoration Trust, of which I am a proud patron. My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who is sitting here, is a member of the trust, and I am also chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the waterways. I would encourage all colleagues here, who are so keen on canals, to join the APPG.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister: in her constituency of Taunton Deane, she has the beautiful Bridgwater and Taunton canal, and I know she is a regular visitor to it, so she has a vested interest.

I pay tribute to the Canal & River Trust, which this year celebrated 10 years of being a charity and whose recent exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall I was

honoured to sponsor. The trust is guardian to 2,000 miles of this nation's canals and waterways across England and Wales, and thousands of significant historic structures, including 71 of our oldest reservoirs, major docks and more than 2,700 listed buildings. The oldest parts of this extraordinary network date back 250 years, when canals served as the arteries of the industrial revolution.

Other navigation authorities play an important role, but because it is by far the largest and the body responsible for the vast majority of the manmade canals in England and Wales, I shall focus my attention on the Canal & River Trust, and on safeguarding the future of the canals and waterways for which it is responsible. I will leave others to discuss the beautiful waterways of Scotland, Northern Ireland and other parts, such as the Norfolk broads.

Since it was formed in 2012 out of British Waterways, with cross-party support, the Canal & River Trust has proven to be an effective steward of our canals and waterways. It has successfully raised their profile and grown the use of the waterways and appreciation of their value to our society, serving as an effective partner to Government in delivering vital economic, social and environmental benefits for this nation.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): In my constituency, there is a great group called the Lapal Canal Trust, which is a dedicated project to restore the Dudley No.2 canal from Birmingham, Selly Oak into the Hawne Basin in Halesowen. It is an incredibly dedicated group of volunteers, which is reflected across the whole of the Canal & River Trust. Will my hon. Friend commend their work? I know that the West Midlands Mayor, Andy Street, has been heavily involved in that restoration project.

Michael Fabricant: I am more than happy to do so. The work that is being done in my hon. Friend's constituency—as in my own constituency, with the Lichfield and Hatherton canals—is testament to the hard work and enthusiasm that people have for the wonderful environment created by our canals.

Our canals have seen a remarkable renaissance over the past 70 years, recovered from the dark days of decline and dereliction in the middle of the 20th century. I applaud the role of the Inland Waterways Association in campaigning so tirelessly for their restoration over that time. The Lichfield canal, which I mentioned to my hon. Friend and is currently being restored, was filled in in the 1960s; how unimaginative and short-sighted planners were back then. Now, with more boats on the waterways and use of the towpaths more popular than ever, we are seeing their benefits realised on a grand scale, repurposed for leisure and recreation, health and wellbeing and homes, and still playing a vital economic role for freight and other commercial uses, attracting visitors from across the globe while enriching the lives of so many local communities.

I recall doing a TV programme on the Coventry canal, and as they were interviewing me a narrowboat approached. I decided to ad lib, being a former broadcaster, and as the narrowboat went by I said, “Where are you from?” I thought they might say Dudley; in fact, they said they were from Tel Aviv and were on a canal holiday. The canals affect not just the health and welfare of our people, but bring in commercial dollars to the United Kingdom.

[*Michael Fabricant*]

Canals bring blue and green space to the heart of urban areas, connecting town and country and enabling people to connect with nature and enjoy traffic-free routes. Millions of our fellow citizens enjoy the canals, be it boating on the water, canoeing, paddle boarding, rowing—in greater numbers, walking and cycling along towpaths too—angling from the banks or simply enjoying these special, beautiful places on our doorstep, taking time away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. There are now over 800 million visits per year to the Canal & River Trust's waterways alone, and that figure is rising.

Waterways are on the doorstep for 9 million people, including many of the one in eight UK residents who do not have a private garden, giving them access to nature—often in areas where green and blue space is limited. I suspect that that is very much the case in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris). Around 60% of the trust's waterways run through the most deprived areas of the country, with higher rates of ill health and economic deprivation. They reach many of those in greater need. As we saw so vividly during the pandemic, canals and waterways make a real difference to people's lives, with tens of thousands rediscovering them in their neighbourhood, finding them to be a lifeline, and experiencing the wellbeing benefits of regular use of free and accessible waterside space ever since.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): My hon. Friend makes some really important points. On his point about urban towns and industrial areas, particularly those that we have in the west midlands, does he agree that, as part of the levelling-up agenda, canals can play a really important part in regenerating industrial heartlands, creating a better environment for families and individuals who want to live in those areas, and creating much better regeneration?

Michael Fabricant: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is interesting that the West Midlands Mayor, who has already been mentioned, is a keen supporter of the Lichfield and Hatherton canals. Why? Lichfield is not in the West Midlands Combined Authority, but it will link to the deprived urban areas of the Black Country to provide additional bucks in the form of tourism. As I mentioned, we need more Israelis and Americans there, and we need more national park rangers.

The trust now partners in programmes to promote green social prescribing pilots and other initiatives, from its "Let's Fish!" scheme, which has seen hundreds of youngsters connect with nature, to its Active Waterways project in partnership with Sport England, which is designed to overcome inactivity, social isolation, and mental and physical health conditions.

The west midlands, a part of which I am proud to represent, has a special affinity for its canals. They are an integral part of our history and economy, as Metro Mayor Andy Street reflected recently in an article that he wrote for "ConservativeHome". The recovery of our canals is tied closely to the renewal of the west midlands, contributing to business and culture while providing the spaces that inspire communities. Once neglected, the canal network is now vibrant. It is a driver for levelling

up, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said, and provides well-connected sites for business and attractive locations for new housing, providing sustainable urban living.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on the emphasis he is placing on rivers, waterways and canals in the west midlands, which I too represent through the Ludlow constituency. I commend to him the manifesto published yesterday by the Conservative Environment Network, which is titled "Changing Courses". It has six measures, all of which are important, to help maintain the health of our waterways. He talked about the health of human beings using them for recreation, but does he agree that when our waterways get polluted, it would be appropriate to consider introducing the ability for the polluter to pay for the problem that they have caused, by diverting the fines currently levied on companies that are found guilty of polluting waterways? Instead of going to the Treasury, they should go to some organisation that would help restore the effects of pollution, regardless of whether it is into a river or canal.

Michael Fabricant: I can say to my right hon. Friend, who is also Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, that not only will I support him, I have actually signed the letter agreeing to that proposal, because it seems an eminent way to ensure that our canals and waterways remain as unpolluted as possible.

We saw how central the canals were to the amazing Commonwealth games in the west midlands, which showcased Britain's industrial heritage on a world stage. Someone bet me earlier that I was going to say something that I had not planned not to say, but I will now say that there are more canals in Birmingham—in fact, I was photographed alongside a marvellous plaque during the Conservative party conference—than there are in Venice, and some might argue that they are more beautiful. We have to introduce gondoliers into Birmingham—don't you think that would be an excellent idea, Sir Robert?

I know that colleagues will have equally strong feelings about the central role that our waterways play in their cities, towns and villages. Canals can play a wider role at a time when our water supply has never been more critical. In a changing climate with increasing drought risk, the trust's canals play an important role in improving the resilience of the nation's water security. They currently move water around the country to support water supplies for approximately 5 million people, including to Bristol and parts of Cheshire. The trust can support more such waterway transfer schemes.

Only last week, Affinity Water announced its intention to work with the trust to use the centuries-old Grand Union canal to move water from the midlands to households in the south-east. Like Plaid Cymru, it wants to charge more and more for its water, which is what we should do in the west midlands when we supply it to the wealthy south-east.

Canals can also supply heating and cooling for waterside buildings, with enough latent thermal energy to support the needs of around 350,000 homes, as well as providing a cooling effect in urban areas during hot weather, according to research verified by the University of Manchester, and they deliver renewable energy from hydropower. Our canals and waterways form an important

part of the United Kingdom's nature recovery network. They provide a vital corridor for wildlife, with habitats that contribute hugely to biodiversity, supporting the key goals of the UK's 25-year environment plan and giving people the proximity to nature that inspires them to care about the natural world—what is around us or across the planet.

As a not-for-profit charity, the Canal & River Trust is arguably the largest urban blue space provider in the United Kingdom. The recently released "Valuing Our Waterways" report showed that it delivers £4.6 billion of social welfare value for the nation each year, plus over £1.5 billion per year in economic value, supporting 80,000 jobs. I will repeat that: 80,000 jobs.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Unsurprisingly, my hon. Friend is making a speech of his usual high standard. On the economic benefit that the Canal & River Trust brings, may I highlight my lovely constituent Kay Andrews from Rothwell who runs Kay's Canal Crafty Arts from her 32-foot narrowboat Pea Green, which is moored at Welford Wharf on the Grand Union canal on the Leicestershire-Northamptonshire border? Kay makes her living by selling hand-painted canal art, and she is a Canal & River Trust licensed roving trader. She trades from the wharf in the summer and then goes round the canals around the country selling her painted crafts. Is that not a wonderful boost to small businesses?

Michael Fabricant: That is a fantastic example from my hon. Friend. Those of us familiar with canals know that type of art, with beautifully, vividly painted flowers on coal scuttles and buckets. An ugly bucket can be transformed into a thing of beauty. I have friends who live some distance from canals who have examples of that work in their own homes. That is a first-rate example of how the canals generate income for others and generate business in the economy as a whole.

I hope that I have left all my colleagues here in no doubt about the importance of and value created by our waterways and those who manage them. They are undoubtedly a national treasure and a critical part of our national infrastructure. At the heart of the trust's success has been the connections it has forged with so many communities along the length of its waterways. We have just heard a first-rate example of that from my hon. Friend. The trust has inspired many to volunteer, and we have heard about that, too. In the past year, the trust's volunteers gave 700,000 hours, as well as hundreds of partner groups and canal adoptions. Those amazing individuals contribute so much to making the waterways network safe, clean and attractive places for us all to enjoy.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Michael Fabricant: In a moment. I will just carry on a little bit, if he will forgive me.

On behalf of everyone here, I want to thank the volunteers. But they can only be a small part of the answer. The sustainable future of our canals depends on a substantial continuing investment in the core infrastructure that underpins our historical waterways network. Caring for waterways is costly.

James Gray: I am a huge supporter of canals, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I have the Kennet and Avon to the south of my constituency and the Thames and Severn to the north, linked soon, I hope, by the Wilts and Berks canal, so we are right in the middle of the southern canal network. What my hon. Friend says about volunteers is absolutely right. Does he agree that the greatest thing about the canal network is that all the work that has been done across the country is largely funded not by the Government, but by volunteers and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which makes a huge and important financial contribution. The network is not Government funded; it is volunteer funded.

Michael Fabricant: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that valuable point. Something like 75% of the Canal & River Trust's funding is from sources other than the Government.

The problem is that our canal system is ageing and is made up of more than 10,000 individual assets, many of which date back 250 years. Many have a high consequence of failure; they are deteriorating and need regular maintenance and repair. That is exacerbated by the impact of more extreme weather events, which make them even more vulnerable. However, it is their age that gives them their beauty and attraction for so many people. Given the serious potential risks posed to neighbouring homes and businesses by the deterioration of reservoirs, high embankments, aqueducts and culverts—imagine what would happen if any of them burst—it is vital that there is stable and sufficient investment in the network to make these assets more resilient and to reduce the possible threat to lives, homes and businesses.

Here is the important bit. The Canal & River Trust receives about a quarter of its funding from the Government, under an agreement secured when it was formed in 2012, and that has been vital in underpinning its progress. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is undertaking a review of its grant for the period beyond March 2027, when the agreement comes to an end. A decision was due in July, but there have inevitably been delays, owing partly to covid and partly to a little turbulence in the Conservative party.

Although it is right that sufficient time be taken to judge the importance of the waterways properly, I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify the revised timetables for the review decision, as the uncertainty is causing great concern to users of the waterways and will soon start to hinder the trust's ability to plan for the future. It has many important long-term projects to deliver, which could affect the safety of so many people. When will a funding announcement be made?

It should also be noted that the trust's grant is declining in real terms and is now worth only a little over half of what British Waterways received prior to 2008. It is also fixed for the six years from 2021 to 2027, so the trust is suffering a significant shortfall at a time when many of its costs are rising by significantly more than the 10% headline inflation rate. Roughly £50 million a year is a very small amount for the Government to contribute for such a huge range of benefits.

At the same time, the trust's wide range of risks, obligations and legal liabilities is growing, in part due to the impact of climate change. The network is subject to more extreme weather events, to which it is acutely

[*Michael Fabricant*]

vulnerable. That poses a potential threat to the many neighbouring homes and businesses. The risk has dramatically changed, even in the past 10 years. The level of spend now required was not anticipated when the trust was first established, but it must nevertheless be addressed.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As a neighbour to my hon. Friend and a fellow Staffordshire MP, I congratulate him on his excellent speech, which eloquently covers the points we would all like to make. In my constituency, waterways are the lifeblood of the economy, and I would like to thank people such as Michael Haig for the work they do.

Michael Fabricant: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I have forgotten its name, but I have walked along the canal in Stone. It is a beautiful canal, and all the things it generates, such as pubs and the local life, mean that it is very much at the heart of the community.

To go back to funding, about half of the trust's planned asset spend is now on reservoir safety. It has added about £70 million to its priority expenditure over five years. Despite those pressures, it has been very effective in developing its own income sources to reduce dependency on future Government funding. Its endowment has grown ahead of market benchmarks, and it has found innovative ways to grow commercial and charitable income.

The trust has built strong partnerships with others, such as the People's Postcode Lottery, which has been a long-term funder, acting as a delivery partner with the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Transport, important public agencies such as Sport England and Natural England, and health service providers, which recognise the tangible benefits the trust can deliver. In 2021-22, the Government grant fell, having made up nearly 40% of the trust's total income in the British Waterways days before 2010, and it is projected to decline to 20% of the trust's income by 2027. The trust has therefore not been sitting idly by, just relying on Government funding.

The trust remains fully committed to reducing the share of its funding coming directly from Government over the long term and is continuing to work in partnership. That transition has to happen at a pace that reflects the reality on the ground; securing the investment our waterways need must be the priority. Without that, their future is at risk, the trust's ability to maintain them is jeopardised, and millions could stand to lose the enjoyment of such a wide-reaching and essential national asset—what I referred to as a national treasure and part of our national heritage.

For those who live on boats, for businesses that depend on waterways, which we have heard about today, and for the services and utilities that need to be carried out on well-maintained towpaths, the effect could be even more devastating. The decline and deterioration of the waterways is an unthinkable outcome for the nation and the communities we represent. I spoke about this the other day on ITV, which also reported from a narrow boat, whose owner painted a bleak picture of what life on the waterways could be like. She said:

“Without that top layer of money coming in, the canals will probably go to rack and ruin; they'll probably become muddy ditches and then nobody will want to walk along them, anglers won't be able to fish and boaters will have nowhere to go.”

She compared the prospect of the decline of our canals—so central to our industrial heritage—with letting the Tower of London fall down.

Our canals are no longer simply remnants of our industrial past; they are a significant social, environmental and economic contributor to our modern society and an integral part of our national infrastructure and heritage. The Minister needs to confirm the timeline for these vital decisions, so that the trust is able to plan the vital investment in our waterways for the longer term, and to give reassurance to the millions who care so passionately for them. That the Government remain committed to the future of our national canal network must be made clear. Underfunding our canals would be a false economy; once they begin to decline, their demise may become inevitable and their benefits may be lost, as they enter a vicious circle, falling into ever worse neglect and disrepair. Like the once great Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, only once they are gone forever will a nation mourn their passing.

Sir Robert Syms (in the Chair): I would like the winding-up speeches to start from around 10.30 am. If Members could stick to five minutes, that would be great. I call Jim Shannon.

10 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) for setting the scene so well. In the devolved Administrations, and especially Northern Ireland, we have different rules, laws and responsibilities.

Our canals and waterways have the potential to be areas of real beauty, whether for boats or for people just going for a walk. As the hon. Gentleman said, they deserve to be kept up to a high standard, and I commend the Canal & River Trust for that, although standards may have slipped during covid—indeed, I suspect that they have. The trust has held a number of events in the House, and I try to attend them all. I am aware of the potential of England's waterways and indeed of all waterways across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Research has shown that spending time by water, whether as part of a lunch break, the daily commute or a weekend stroll, really can make us feel happier and healthier, and I want to focus on the health benefits. With ever-increasing rates of obesity and stress and declining mental health in the United Kingdom, we are uniquely placed when it comes to making a significant contribution to improving the wellbeing of others.

I am no stranger to talking about my constituency—the hon. Member for Lichfield spoke of his constituency; I will speak of mine—and that also relates to my canals and walkways. Northern Ireland has numerous canals. In Newtownards town, where my main office is, we have a fairly large canal. In the past, the office has been inundated with queries about canal maintenance. Responsibility for that falls between different stools—as it often does—including the Department for Infrastructure's rivers department, local councils and landowners. There is often a to-and-fro correspondence about accountability.

Constituents often refer to the litter and debris and sometimes to the health hazard. The canal is a wonderful walk, and it is also a cycling and running venue. Ards and North Down Borough Council maintains Londonderry Park as one of its main centres for leisure and relaxation, and the canal's potential is great. Over the years, I have heard about lots of other issues, including public health. We are in close proximity to the Ards shopping centre. For some reason—I don't know why—some people think that, after they take their groceries home in the trolleys, they can just dump them in the canal instead of taking them back. That is something we are trying to find a resolution to.

There is certainly scope for DFI Rivers to do more in Northern Ireland to fund and maintain waterways. DEFRA has a role to play. What discussions has the Minister held with authorities and the regional Administration in Northern Ireland on how we can work together to produce something unique and wonderful with our waterways and canals?

Our canals are also a brilliant opportunity for young people to learn the basics of how to harness nature, rivers, bridges and the channels. We also encourage an interest in science, technology, engineering and maths, both in education and for later life, and there are lots of things that waterways and canals can offer in that regard.

For families, for mental health and for those wanting to take small boats out on our canals and waterways, we have a responsibility to ensure the safety and cleanliness of these bodies of water. I will be raising the matter with the permanent secretary in the Department back home to ensure that canals in my constituency are given the attention they need, not just in the town of Newtownards but across the whole of Strangford, and that includes the canals near the Braeside in Killyleagh and at the end of the river in Comber.

Canals offer fantastic potential for physical and emotional wellbeing. UK canals and waterways are central to rejuvenating constituencies, with their tourism potential and all the other issues the hon. Member for Lichfield mentioned. We can have all that, and better, for all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As I always say, better together.

10.5 am

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Erewash is the only constituency that is named after a river and a canal, so it is quite appropriate that I speak in this debate. I mentioned that in my maiden speech, so it is great to be able to expand on what I started a number of years ago.

I want to highlight the amazing work of two organisations in my constituency: the Erewash Canal Preservation & Development Association—that is quite a mouthful, and is usually shortened to ECP&DA—and the Canal & River Trust, which we have already heard a lot about. Without the ECP&DA, a voluntary organisation, the Erewash canal would not exist today. Back in 1968, the British Waterways board was about to close the canal, but the ECP&DA was formed. It probably never anticipated that, over 50 years later, it would be awarded the Queen's award for voluntary service, in recognition of the important role that it has played in our community.

The volunteers have restored and maintained the Sandiacre lock cottages and toll house, which now open as a museum on Sundays. Towards Christmas, they have

mince pies and various festive activities, which is always good to see. The association has also ensured that navigation along the full length of the canal, from Trent lock to the great northern basin in Langley Mill, is possible. The association also continually patrols the canal and extracts a variety of waste items, which I am sure are found in many other canals, from the bottom.

The association celebrated its 50th anniversary with an amazing boat rally, and next year it will celebrate its 55th anniversary in the same way. The association has many benefits, both for the individuals involved and for Erewash. I take the opportunity to thank the ECP&DA; Erewash would not be the same without it—we would have only a river and not a canal.

Just a few weeks ago, the ECP&DA highlighted the many weeds in the canal, which the association was concerned would impact boats going to the rally next May. That is where collaboration with the Canal & River Trust came in, which shows the real benefits of organisations working together. Understanding the importance of easy navigation along the canal for boats visiting the rally, the Canal & River Trust will clear the weeds from what I call the bottom half of the canal, and the ECP&DA will clear the section nearer its base. I look forward to many visiting boats, and people enjoying the pleasures of the Erewash canal, including the newly restored Bennerley viaduct, next May. Whenever anybody from outside the area comes to the Erewash canal, they are amazed by its beauty and tranquillity.

I now turn to the Canal & River Trust in more detail. I met its director for the east midlands a couple of weeks ago to talk about the canal. That included the role that it will play in walking and cycling projects and the waterfront project in the Long Eaton town fund deal, which is part of the levelling-up project, and the trust's work to repair the locks at Gallows Inn in January. I look forward to seeing those locks from inside, without the water. In the past, my office team and I have volunteered for a day with the trust—the stretch of fencing at Trent lock is badly painted, but we definitely had fun that day.

That is what waterways provide: fun and recreation. They provide an opportunity for exercise and benefit our health and wellbeing. The work of the Canal & River Trust is invaluable. It is the guardian of our waterways, whether the River Erewash, the Erewash canal or the other 2,000 miles of our water network. It provides employment, recreation and volunteering opportunities. It is a protector of our natural environment and history.

As we have heard, DEFRA is reviewing its long-term grant funding. That is why this debate is so timely: the Minister can hear at first hand about the great and invaluable work carried out by the Canal & River Trust. The Erewash canal is accessible because of the determination of the Erewash Canal Preservation & Development Association, and the Canal & River Trust now plays its part in maintaining it. If our waterways are not invested in through the Canal & River Trust, I fear that too many of them will be lost, in the same way that we nearly lost the Erewash canal.

With the benefits attributed to the Canal & River Trust estimated at over £4 billion each year, we cannot afford not to continue funding it. The Government's investment in the trust is leveraged many times over, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield

[Maggie Throup]

(Michael Fabricant). The current grant of £50 million per year is money well spent. My plea to the Minister is to give the Canal & River Trust certainty and to renew the agreement without delay.

10.10 am

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As we have already heard, canals and inland waterways are an integral part of our life and our landscape. In recent years, it is fair to say that we have seen a remarkable revival. My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) referred earlier to covid-19; that is just one of the many factors that has encouraged us all to appreciate what we have on our doorsteps more than ever before.

In Aldridge-Brownhills we have the Wyrley and Essington canal, which has some wonderful walkways along the towpath where people can watch the wildlife, observe nature and enjoy being outdoors. In recent years, we have seen a real revival of the Brownhills canal festival, which is organised by the Lichfield & Hatherton Canals Restoration Trust. It brings visitors to Brownhills and local residents together for what has become an excellent event. We see many community organisations and traders taking part, including the roving traders. If anyone is ever in Brownhills when the canal festival is on, I recommend going to the Jam Butty, because it makes some of the most fantastic jams and marmalades.

Michael Fabricant: I have bought from the Jam Butty. It was at the Huddlesford heritage gathering in my constituency. I believe my right hon. Friend moors her narrow boat there; I think she should declare that.

Wendy Morton: It is my husband's boating passion, but I will come to that shortly. In 2016, Aldridge-Brownhills hosted the Inland Waterways Association festival of water in Pelsall. We took that boat from Huddlesford over to Pelsall for the festival, and we had a great time. Alas, we no longer have that boat, but I can assure you that we still have another one. My husband has a real passion for his canal boats.

Those are just some of the significant economic, social and environmental benefits of our canals. It is estimated that more than £4 billion in additional benefits is brought in every year. That is pretty impressive, especially considering how the Canal & River Trust—a charity—was founded only in 2012. Prior to that, the public-funded British Waterways was responsible for canals and rivers in England and Wales. It is a huge task, with over 1,500 locks, 55 tunnels, 281 aqueducts, almost 3,000 bridges and 71 reservoirs to maintain, improve and invest in for the future.

It is fair to describe the CRT as the guardian of around 2,000 miles of waterways and the protector of historic and critical infrastructure. Much of that is more than 200 years old, and is now vulnerable to climate change. As we sadly saw with the Toddbrook reservoir dam a couple of years ago, that has a real potential to threaten neighbouring homes.

What makes the journey and story of the CRT even more remarkable is the way in which it is funded from a diverse range of sources; I would go through those, but I am conscious of the clock. Alongside the various income streams, I want to recognise the role of volunteers

in my consistency. Aldridge rotary club is one of the many organisations up and down the country that is involved in maintaining one particular strip. I must declare an interest as a Rotarian.

The CRT is a huge success story, but I cannot stress enough the importance of the £52.6 million grant that it receives from DEFRA. I came to speak today to urge the Minister and her Government to continue to support the CRT. The benefits are massive—there are health-related, economic and wellbeing benefits, as well as benefits for community groups. At a time when so many families are feeling financial pressure, it is an opportunity to explore the outdoors for free. Given that the CRT has not just stepped up to the plate but gone way beyond it, I hope that the Minister and her team will look positively when reviewing the grant and continue to pay, *de minimis*, the £52.6 million a year—or increase it, because the return on investment is absolutely huge.

10.15 am

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) for this important opportunity to speak on this matter. As everybody knows, I represent a beautiful and rural coastal constituency with 52 miles of glorious coastline. But we also have a little secret—one that not many people know of. I have Norfolk's only locked sailing canal, the North Walsham and Dilham canal. I invite my hon. Friend to come and visit it any time he wants.

Michael Fabricant: I will take that up if I can stay with my hon. Friend.

Duncan Baker: Certainly, but I had better check with the wife first.

The canal was originally about 9 miles long and was built by private investors under a local Act of Parliament passed in 1812. It was built for carrying goods in Norfolk's famous wherries, originating from or travelling to as far afield as London and the north-east via Great Yarmouth. It served the local community for over 100 years. But like many canals, it fell into disuse with the new railways and the improvements on our roads that made the transportation of heavy goods easier and faster.

In 2000, enthusiastic volunteers started to restore our waterway into what is now quite simply the most beautiful and magical setting one could ever see. It was in 2008 that the North Walsham & Dilham Canal Trust was formed. The trust volunteers have helped the owner of one of the stretches of canal to completely restore the first mile. From North Walsham, one lock has been completely rebuilt, another pair of gates at a second lock have been replaced, and we are now well into the next section of the canal, which is a mile and a half in length—and that work is royally ongoing.

The question is, why is such work so important? Like this debate, it is about the future. Ultimately, volunteer groups do it to benefit nature and biodiversity, and to preserve the historical structures that in many cases, up and down the land, are not used as they used to be. They also do it to help the welfare of our local populations and for tourism, which we have heard many hon. Members talk about.

In my constituency, the volunteers regularly hold work parties, which have been described as a sort of outdoor gymnasium, for people to come and get involved. That brings great benefits to the community. My stretch of this beautiful canal is now used for wild swimmers, canoeists, paddleboarders and fishermen and women; there is also a small solar-powered vessel operated by the trust and its volunteers. Quite simply, it is also a quiet spot to have a picnic, or to take a few hours out and just relax. The benefits to mental and physical health are clear for all to see.

However, there is always a “but”—and my “but” is about the Environment Agency. My plea to the Minister is that the EA must listen and learn from the volunteers, because if it was not for my volunteers, this piece of disused canal that had fallen into disrepair would not be as established as it is today. The greatest challenge of the trustees is always to prove to the EA the great work that they are doing. That is entirely within the aims and the objectives of the Environment Act 2021.

I end by thanking the volunteers, especially those work party leaders. Without them, and without many of the hon. Members who have contributed today, our beautiful canals would not exist. I thank David Revill, our current chairman, who has done so much work, and Graham Pressman, who humbly describes himself as just the boating officer on my stretch of canal. However, all those back home know that Graham is a fountain of information and enthusiasm who embodies the passion that has restored this fabulous waterway.

I leave hon. Members with the aims of my trust, which I am sure are the aims of every single trust mentioned in this room today: to promote the benefit for the public and the restoration, conservation and protection of the natural environment around the canal. On seeing the work my volunteers have done, I am sure the canal is in safe hands going forward.

10.20 am

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) for bringing this important debate.

I am excited to talk about our canals because I am the vice president of the Cotswold Canals Trust and I take every opportunity to talk about the fabulous men and women who have done so much for our communities. The organisation boasts the Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service, which I nominated it for and we accepted last year. It has also won engineering awards and so many more accolades.

The trust is winning stuff with so much good reason, because we have hundreds of volunteers, as many hon. Members have said, and they are really skilled. Being in my patch means we have nuclear scientists, engineers and people who have taken time out to come and help us with our vision for our canal network. They also let me dredge part of our canal. If hon. Members look at my Instagram video of that, they will see a massive smile on my face as I saw the dredgers go backwards and forwards. The volunteers are absolutely fantastic. They also work closely with councils; Stroud District Council is a big partner. The stakeholder working group is huge and to their credit. We also have real excellence in the fundraising department, winning £9 million of

lottery funding, and I opened the Stonehouse bookshop, which is the second of the fundraising bookshops in our area.

I live near the Saul junction and I can see the River Severn from my house, so waterways are important to me. As some hon. Members have already said, during the devastatingly dark times of lockdown, when we were walking round in circles for the short time we were allowed out of the house, the canal waterway was vital to my mental health and to many other people’s as well.

The main reason why the communities and canal network teams in my constituency are superb is their brilliant and bold ambition for what we are trying to do. In 1975, a team of waterway enthusiasts recognised the importance of our canals. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield has so beautifully brought to life today, we have to bear in mind the history of the networks. The Gloucester and Sharpness canal was planned in the late 18th century and it opened in 1827. By 1905 the traffic exceeded 1 million tonnes. In my own little village, we had an important Cadbury’s factory, and we were bringing in goods and using the canal networks to connect to the midlands. We all know how important that business was for our country and for chocolate.

As for that bold ambition, we would like to connect the River Severn to the Thames, with water-transfer opportunities woven in. We have a wet bit of the country and we can bring it to a drier bit of the country. We have made a real commitment to restoring the Cotswold canals to full navigation in the interests of conservation, biodiversity and local quality of life. We have had a few phases of that, with the Gloucester and Sharpness canal phase and the Cotswold Water Park to the River Thames. Phase 3 will link the central section, which includes the now-derelict Sapperton tunnel. Phase 1A was opened by His Majesty the King and we have come up against some serious engineering challenges. I would welcome some visits to the A38 roundabout, because we have put a canal through it, which is pretty impressive.

Will the Minister visit Stroud? I know she knows and loves my patch already. Will she give the Government a bit of a kick on funding and also ensure they understand the importance of that? I say “they” because it is not just DEFRA—it is the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department of Health and Social Care and so many other Government Departments. They need to understand that when we ask for support for our canal and waterway networks, it is about tourism, health, wellbeing and the local economy. I ask the Government to work with organisations such as the Cotswolds Canals Trust because they are stacked full of experts and they are constructive. They do not ask for something unless they genuinely need it, because their first port of call is usually to try to find things and do it themselves. I cannot thank my local teams enough. I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

10.25 am

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this morning, Sir Robert. I too thank the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) for bringing forward this debate on the future of the UK’s canals and waterways and congratulate him on what was an excellent speech. I also thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Erewash (Maggie Throup), for North Norfolk (Duncan

[Steven Bonnar]

Baker), for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) and the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for their valuable contributions to the debate. It is a pleasure to come here this morning to inform this Chamber of the healthy state of Scotland's thriving canals and waterways. I am glad the hon. Member for Lichfield is looking forward to hearing so much about them.

Canals have connected Scottish waterways east to west and north to south for more than 200 years, and they continue to play an increasingly vital role in connecting our local communities back to nature and our heritage. Scotland's inland waterways are treasured historic assets that firmly belong to the people of Scotland. The Forth and Clyde, Union and Monkland canals in the lowlands of Scotland, the Crinan canal in Argyll and the Caledonian canal in the highlands extend to around 137 miles from coast to coast, across our country and through the cities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Inverness.

Built more than 200 years ago to power and fire the industrial revolution, with coal from the Lanarkshire mines transported along these intricate canal ways, today our inland waterways massively contribute to the Scottish Government's agenda of developing a greener, healthier, wealthier, smarter, safer and ultimately fairer Scotland by acting as a catalyst for sustainable economic development, regeneration and tourism, contributing to education, biodiversity and our heritage and promoting active living and healthier lifestyles, which we all know to be so important.

Today, Scottish Canals, the body responsible for managing the country's inland waterways, is utilising these 18th-century assets alongside new and innovative technology to tackle modern-day problems. Working with local and national partners to create pioneering systems, Scottish Canals is helping to combat flooding and driving positive transformation in some of Scotland's most disadvantaged areas.

The Monkland canal in my constituency was the basis for creating surrounding settlements such as the town of Coatbridge. As I touched on earlier, it was responsible for the transportation of coal from the former mining heartlands of Lanarkshire to fire the industry we are so renowned for in Scotland. As the coal industry has receded and times have changed, the modern-day canal is tended to and taken care of—like so many others, as we have heard this morning—by volunteers. The Friends of Monkland Canal group is a volunteer organisation that is chock full of passionate people who undertake regular activities along our inland waterways, helping to inform local residents of the history of the canal, working collaboratively to keep the area clean and tidy and making it a welcoming environment for locals and those from wider afield to utilise.

The volunteers' fantastic work has successfully encouraged a major investment from Sustrans, which has provided a grant of £429,000 for upgrades to the pathways surrounding the canal, as well as the installation of new drainage systems. Paving and other remedial works along the canal approaches will open up the canal to so many more residents—those who use wheelchairs, families with prams and buggies, cyclists and so on—making it more accessible to everyone in our community and allowing it to be used by every person every single day of the year. This work will bring

Monkland canal right into the 21st century and make it fit for future use. I am sure the Minister will join me in commending the Friends of Monkland Canal organisation for its stellar work and its service to not only the local community but all of Scotland for its care and consideration of our canals and inland waterways.

As we British Waterways move towards a post-covid era, we must understand the positive impact that canals and their environs can have on our mental health and wellbeing and utilise them to overcome the still-felt effects of multiple lockdown periods on our communities. A global study conducted by the University of Glasgow in 2020 found that people who live within 750 yards of a canal have lower risks of heart disease, diabetes and hypertension compared with those who live further away, and that is independent of socioeconomic factors.

The SNP and indeed the Scottish Government fully recognise the benefits that canals offer and are committed to supporting Scottish Canals to deliver on its ambitious objectives. Since 2019, the capital grant for Scottish Canals has increased by 87%, alongside an uplift each year in resource funding, plus additional funding to mitigate the impacts of covid-19. The most recent project by Scottish Canals is the Stockingfield bridge project in north Glasgow, which has won the 2022 Institution of Civil Engineers people's choice award—well done to all involved. The two-way spanning cable-stayed pedestrian and cycle bridge opened earlier this month. It took 21 months to complete at a cost of £14 million, which is a bargain. It connects the communities of Maryhill, Gilshochill and Ruchill on either side of the Forth and Clyde canal for the first time since 1790.

Finally, I encourage our counterparts from all across these islands to follow the example of Scottish Canals and ensure that our waterways are protected and upgraded, to allow the surrounding communities to embrace the ultimate benefits of the splendid nature around them.

10.31 am

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this morning, Sir Robert.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) on securing this important debate on the future of Britain's canals and waterways. He has campaigned tirelessly on this issue over the years, and with good reason. That was evident from his contribution and from the speeches and interventions by many others. It is not often that the Opposition are in full agreement with the hon. Member, but that is the case today. We should all congratulate ourselves on that.

I offer the apologies of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), the shadow Minister, for whom I am subbing today. He is away from the parliamentary estate on shadow ministerial business, so I have been drafted in to guide us through the calm waters of this debate.

This country was the first in the world to develop a nationwide canal network that connected towns and cities, brought people together and developed and stimulated so much of the trade, industry and commerce that modern Britain was built on. I have the great pleasure of serving the people of Newport West, and in our neck of the woods we boast a unique flight of 14 locks, the Cefn flight, which rises 160 feet in just half a mile. That

must have been an amazing sight in its heyday. Such locks and canals are a legacy of the engineering wonder of the industrial revolution, and they also make up part of the Monmouthshire and Brecon canal network, which is widely recognised as being one of the most beautifully located set of waterways in Britain. I give a shout out to the Monmouthshire, Brecon and Abergavenny Canals Trust for all the work that it does, and in particular to Councillor Yvonne Forsey and the other volunteers in Newport West.

Our canals are no longer the arteries of trade that they were 200 years ago. The car, bike, van and truck have all come through the middle of them—literally. Today, canals and riverways mainly provide other functions—possibly too many to list in the short time I have to speak, which only shows their importance. We have already heard that they offer free and accessible outdoor space and recreation for millions of people. Indeed, Adam Jogee, who works in my office, and his fiancée Alison Lawther, alongside two of their friends, Mark Streather and Allison Katz, took the chance to stay on a canal boat during a recent recess. It was Adam's first time on a canal, and he said that although it was a little chilly at night they had a great time on the canals around Bosworth, Stoke Golding and Nuneaton. I hope the hon. Member for Lichfield is pleased to know that on this side of the House we do not just praise our canals but use and cherish them, too.

Our canals provide homes for boaters; importantly, they help to prevent floods; and they have given us a network of green corridors steeped in rich industrial history that is unlike anywhere else in the world. Our waterways are also home to tens of thousands of different species, including some of our most precious creatures, such as bats, water voles and dormice, all of which are at risk of extinction. This debate gives us an opportunity to air our concerns and bring attention to the fact that we all need to do more and go further. Given that the United Kingdom sits in the bottom 10% of countries globally when it comes to biodiversity, it seems obvious that we should do everything in our power to protect the unique habitats we have and the plants and wildlife that call them home. That is what His Majesty's Opposition will do when we win the next election.

We are broadly at one on the issue, but I cannot let the Minister leave before I have raised a number of specific issues. I know she would expect nothing less. She knows that the job of protecting and developing our phenomenal canal and waterway network falls largely to the Canal & River Trust, so why have Ministers postponed the announcement of the trust's grant, which provides around a quarter of its funding? It was due to be announced on 1 July. The fact that the Government—well, two Prime Ministers ago—were collapsing is no excuse not to ensure a sustainable and long-term programme of support for the trust, so why, as the final leaves fall from the trees, have we still not heard from the Government, despite their assurances that the overdue funding would be allocated in autumn? The delay is threatening the future of our canals and of all those who rely on them. Furthermore, it makes it more difficult for the trust to plan for the future and hampers the progress of a number of large projects that are designed to help to build and shape much-needed resilience to the harsh and increasingly frequent effects of climate change.

Indeed, the Office for Environmental Protection—a body set up by the Government only last year—has received a complaint describing the constant delays as being

“at risk of becoming the default culture within Defra”,

and just weeks ago the Government failed to meet their own legal deadline to introduce targets on clean air, land and water. There have been many more missed deadlines, quietly scrapped funds and delays to important legislation—I am thinking in particular of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill.

As we discuss the future of Britain's canals and waterways, I am conscious of the fact that, behind the grand environmental claims, Ministers constantly make the wrong choices. The Opposition believe that is unacceptable, and we want Ministers to be active and to speak out much more quickly. It is not hard to wonder whether the delay in the announcement of the grant for the Canal & River Trust is about whether to slash it or scrap it. If that happens, the trust has been clear that it will not be able to maintain its work of protecting our precious waterways.

At a time of ecological and economic crisis, Britain's canals and waterways are a haven for wildlife and people alike. I ask the Minister to heed our calls, and the calls made by Government Members, and commit herself to protecting our heritage, saving our wildlife and preserving much-needed opportunities for future generations by properly funding Britain's canals and waterways, and to do that today.

Sir Robert Syms (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, let me remind the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), who introduced the debate, that he might get a minute or two to make a winding-up speech.

10.37 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Robert, for what has been a most delightful start to the morning, kicked off by our effervescent colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant). I expected nothing less because my hon. Friend brings real passion to the subject, on which he has spoken many times. This morning, my hon. Friend also brought his acting skills to bear and used his American accent. All that has helped us to bring the subject to light, as has the wonderful array of colleagues present. At one point, there were no fewer than 10 Conservative Members here, although I wonder where our Labour colleagues are. Perhaps they are not as passionate about canals as we are.

Jim Shannon: We are passionate about canals!

Rebecca Pow: I of course do not include the hon. Gentleman in that comment. He is ever present in Westminster Hall, and he brought to light the canals in his area. I am going to speak about English and Welsh canals, not Scottish and Northern Irish ones, because Scotland and Northern Ireland sort themselves out and run things themselves. However, it was lovely to hear about the canals in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

What a cornucopia of canals we have heard about—canals from across the country—and I have been struck by the stories that Members told, particularly those

[Rebecca Pow]

about the engagement of volunteers. We have also heard many great names, such as the Erewash canal and the Wyrley and Essington canal, as well as a whole lot from the Cotswolds, which I think my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) puts under the Cotswolds hat—the Stroudwater canal, the Gloucester and Sharpness canal, and the Thames and Severn canal, which are all in the area. She is spoilt for choice.

We also heard about the Walsham and Dilham canal, which is small but becoming perfectly formed after all the work. I have had quite an association with the Kennet and Avon canal, which ran right past my school in the centre of Bath. It played quite a big role in my life: we would go out there for art classes and walk along it. I met my first boyfriend on a sponsored walk along the canal from Bath to Bradford-on-Avon, so I have never forgotten it. My husband and his mates always used to do some sort of activity every year, and the very last activity he went on with his group of lads before he died was on the Kennet and Avon canal. It was in November and it was pouring with rain. He was on crutches, but they still had the most magical time. I remember it with great fondness. That is what can be done on a canal.

I now live near the Bridgwater and Taunton canal, which my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield mentioned. It was a go-to place to walk along during the lockdown, so it was very important. We have heard about all the benefits that our canals bring, including the huge public benefits—enjoyment, leisure, recreation and waterside holidays. My husband went canoeing, and paddleboarding has become incredibly popular; I suppose it is quite good to do on a canal because there are no waves, unless a boat passes.

Canals have all those great benefits, and there is also their history and industrial heritage. There are huge health and wellbeing benefits to walking along a canal. During lockdown, we regularly used to see kingfishers. Even with all those people walking along the path, the kingfishers were not afraid because it was their habitat and home. We have heard about the amazing green corridors that canals can forge through our countryside, and particularly in cities and towns. I take issue with what the shadow Minister said, because the Government are doing a great deal of work on reintroducing biodiversity in nature. We are setting targets for that, and canals form a very important part of it.

The United Kingdom's largest navigation authority is the Canal & Rivers Trust. As has been said, something like 800 million visits are made to our canals every year, which is pretty phenomenal. That shows just how important they are. Our waterways and navigation authorities have a really important part to play in helping to ensure that this important piece of our infrastructure is resilient to climate change and helps us to meet our net zero targets through sustainable transport, energy generation and the transfer of water.

Water security is becoming an increasingly important issue. I am the Water Minister—I am pleased to say that is one of the hats I wear—and water security is as important as all the other issues that we are tackling, such as water demand. Climate change is triggering changes and extreme weather events. The Government are developing policies to adapt to climate change right

throughout the country, and our navigation authorities are exploring ways to adapt the network to climate change.

The infrastructure can also contribute to net zero. That includes examining the feasibility of increasing electrification of the networks and encouraging boaters to switch to electric vessels. Earlier this year, the Broads Authority, with funding from the Department for Transport's clean maritime demonstration competition, examined the potential for the electrification of the broads hire boat fleet. The Environment Agency has installed a number of electric charging points along the non-tidal River Thames, and the Canal & River Trust has installed electric charging points on a few of its London canals, including a trial eco-mooring zone on the Regent's canal, part-funded by DEFRA and the London Borough of Islington.

Wendy Morton: The Minister is setting out some fantastic examples of how we can help our waterways to adapt for the future with electric points and so forth, but one thing that really concerns me is our ageing infrastructure. Looking ahead is fantastic and absolutely the right thing to do, but will she reassure me that the Government will play their part when it comes to the maintenance and restoration of the infrastructure that we have today?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. Friend for that pertinent point. I will refer to it a bit later in my speech, but it is a really serious point. Of course, infrastructure is affected by climate change and extremes of weather, which are putting more pressure on some assets. As well as the opportunities around electrification, there are similar opportunities with active travel and the cycle networks along our canals, which allow people to get away from roadsides and travel in a much fresher and cleaner environment. If we can get more people to take to their bikes, it will help us reduce carbon emissions and tackle the net zero targets.

Let me go back to water security, which is really important. Our navigation authorities have an important role to play in this endeavour in times of both flooding and drought. They can help by managing water levels, and the long dry spells this summer have highlighted how the canal network could increasingly play a role in water transfer, particularly from west to east. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud mentioned taking water from the wet west to the east. All these things obviously have to be carefully worked out, and I have spoken to the Canal & River Trust about how such opportunities would work. I particularly welcome Affinity Water's plan to work with the Canal & River Trust to transfer water through the Grand Union canal, and I know others are looking at other such opportunities.

As has been touched on, the network has a really important historic value, with much of it being more than 200 years old. It matters a great deal to people and a lot of restoration work is under way. We have heard so much about volunteers and I, too, thank them. So many volunteers have played a key role in restoring sections of our canals, and I particularly want to mention that I had a wonderful trip to the Monty canal in Montgomeryshire, where I met lots of volunteers and saw the work they were doing. They have benefited from a £16 million levelling-up fund grant. Members

have mentioned the levelling-up benefits of canals, and that money is being spent well in the community to restore the fantastic canal in the centre of town.

Ruth Jones: The Minister is talking about funding; when can we expect the funding announcement for the Canal & River Trust that was supposed to be made back in July? Rather than the parliamentary “shortly”, can we have an actual date?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Lady mentioned that in her speech, as did others, so I will come to it now. Many Members mentioned the annual grant to the Canal & River Trust, so I want to explain a bit about the grant, how it happened and the history around it. The grant stands at £52.6 million until 2027 and currently represents about one quarter of the trust’s annual income, which means that the trust derives three quarters of its annual income from other sources. That distinction is very important, because one of the trust’s objectives when it was created in 2012 with charitable status was that it would be free of the public sector constraints that its predecessor, British Waterways, was subject to. Freedom from public sector constraints meant that the trust would be free to develop other income generation strategies, including by benefiting from charitable donations and legacies, charity tax reliefs, third-party project funding and borrowing on the financial markets.

It is also worth mentioning that in 2012 the trust was endowed by the Government with a significant property and investment portfolio, which is currently valued at around £1.1 billion, and the returns were to be used as income. The clear intent was that the trust would reduce its dependence on the Government grant and foster increasing self-sufficiency by providing access to income streams not available to public corporations and by stimulating new efficiencies.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield that British Waterways received more funding than the Canal & River Trust: indeed, that was the intent behind establishing an independent charity to undertake that function. However, it is important that we compare like with like when looking at the evolution of Government funding. British Waterways, a public corporation, was responsible for the waterways in England, Wales and Scotland, whereas the Canal & River Trust—which is a charity, with access to charitable benefits and tax breaks—is responsible for England and Wales only. Scottish Canals funding represented £10.5 million in 2011-12, and the existing grant increased by £10 million in 2015-16 and has been inflation-adjusted until April 2022. It is then required by the grant agreement to be flat for the final five years of the grant period.

Wendy Morton: I appreciate the Minister setting out the history behind the finances, but I want to reinforce the point that when we discuss the £52.6 million that the Canal & River Trust is in receipt of, we must not underestimate the huge level of income streams that they are generating, heading towards the target that the Government want them to get to. It is important that the Government do not lose sight of the £4.6 billion-worth of benefits that are coming in in various ways. Also, given that the climate change agenda has changed so much since 2012, does the Minister agree that we are not comparing apples with apples here?

Rebecca Pow: My right hon. Friend makes some sound points. That is why the team in DEFRA is working so closely with the trust to iron out what is required and what would be the right tapering or reduction of rates. That is being carefully calculated, because huge benefits are realised and the pressures of climate change are changing things. Of course, as we have heard, the Canal & River Trust is already attracting grants from other places—the levelling-up fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund, and so on. Some big grants have come in that way as well.

Maggie Throup: Will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: It will have to be quick, because I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield a chance to wind up.

Maggie Throup: The Minister has hit the nail on the head, but without realising that the grant that the Canal & River Trust receives is an enabling grant to ensure it can get grants from other sources. Without that enabling grant from the Government, some of the other grants and support would probably not come through, which shows how important the Government’s support will continue to be.

Rebecca Pow: I do not think anybody denies the importance of the Government’s support, hence why so much care is being taken in working out the future of that support. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield noted, the grant was agreed for a period of 15 years, from 2012 to 2027. That was to give the trust a measure of financial stability while working on its other income streams, which it has done very effectively. That includes maintenance of the canal network, which is a significant part of annual expenditure, and it is the trust’s responsibility to decide on its priorities and consider where it needs to spend its money. We are all aware of the Toddbrook reservoir dam incident three years ago, which highlighted how essential it is to put safety at the forefront as a top priority of waterways. I know that will remain the case.

The grant agreement requires that a review of the trust’s grant be carried out at the 10-year point, which is what my Department is currently completing. We are looking with a laser focus at all the issues that have been raised, scrutinising the trust’s performance to date—has the grant been value for money?—and the case for continued funding into the future. As I have said, we are working closely with the trust on this matter; the review has been concluded, and indeed was due to report by 1 July. A range of extraneous influences, politely referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash, slowed that somewhat, but it is progressing now with speed. I am unable to comment further in detail on the outcomes, but it will be announced forthwith—not shortly but forthwith. The Department and I will continue to work with the new chair, David Orr. I am looking forward to meeting him and going out on more visits.

In closing, I thank my hon. Friend for raising the subject, and all colleagues for giving insights on the joys of canals and getting to the nub of what is concerning people. Funding is obviously of paramount importance. We have to get that right, which is why time is being taken over it. The announcement will be made as soon as possible. In the meantime, I wish the trust all the best

[Rebecca Pow]

with the great work it does. I do not think anybody denies for a minute the enormous benefits we get from our canal network.

10.56 am

Michael Fabricant: I thank everyone who participated in the debate. I did not make a list but the Minister did, so I would like to thank her for making that list of about a dozen people who participated. I thank all the parties involved, especially the Minister.

I was feverishly looking up the meaning of “forthwith”, but I did not get that far, or of “immediately” or “in the near future”. Clearly, that is immensely important, as I think the Minister knows. I will embarrass her by saying she is nodding, I think in agreement with me. Everyone here realises the importance for the Canal & River Trust to have some idea of what its grant will be after March 2027, when it terminates. It needs to plan which canals remain open. We do not want to see any of our canals close like the example I gave of the Chesapeake and Ohio canal. As Joni Mitchell sang:

“You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone...They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.”

We do not want to see that happen to our canals and waterways, but we need some certainty. I am a little disappointed, though I understand the reasons why the Minister could not give certainty today. I am sure that “forthwith” means not a year or two years from now. I am sure that “forthwith” does not even mean three months from now. I hope that “forthwith” means that within a few weeks we will learn precisely what grant the Canal & River Trust will be given. Only once it knows that, can it plan ahead. Only by planning ahead will we be able to maintain such an important element of our national heritage.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the UK’s canals and waterways.

Asylum Seekers Contingency Accommodation: Belfast

11 am

Sir Robert Syms (in the Chair): I will call Claire Hanna to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention with 30-minute debates.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the use of contingency accommodation for asylum seekers in Belfast.

It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Sir Robert. I welcome the opportunity to raise this issue and I welcome the presence of the Minister to respond. It is fair to say that the Minister’s party and my own are probably in very different places ideologically in how we approach asylum and humanitarian issues, but I intend to focus my remarks on the implementation and impact of UK Government policy as it manifests in the area that I represent—primarily the use of hotels for long periods due to the catastrophic Home Office failures in processing asylum applications.

The growing backlog in decisions and claims is the core problem in asylum, meaning that more people are left in limbo, unable to move on and live a life. Anyone in direct contact with people in asylum accommodation knows that it is unsuitable for most, especially families and those with specific needs, on anything more than a very short-term basis. By way of context, it is of course a complicated and hard enough and dangerous world out there. Although the necessity to leave one’s home country in order to survive is beyond the lived experience of most of us in this room, we know there are myriad reasons that people are forced to make the decision to flee their home—war, famine, persecution, and increasingly the climate crisis. We are lucky to live in places where we are not faced with those kinds of decisions. Indeed, the UK receives a relatively low number of applications from the global asylum seeker population—considerably below the European average.

The number of people seeking asylum has not changed dramatically over the years, although the routes have changed and the number of arrivals in Belfast has increased. There is a current upward curve, but, overall, arrivals remain below the levels of asylum sought in the early 2000s. What has changed, though, and what has collapsed, is the Home Office’s willingness or ability to process applications properly, and that is creating bottlenecks in the use of contingency hotel accommodation. The system is broken and unfortunately there seems to be no plan to fix it. If the Government spent as much money on resourcing, processing or designing safe routes as they have on cartoonishly cruel proposals such as the Rwanda scheme and wave machines, we would be in a very different position.

I am encouraged by word of positive discussions with France to reduce unsafe channel crossings because, to date, the only success of Government policy has been to increase fear and trauma among asylum seekers and refugees. It is not reducing the number of people coming because they do not, in most cases, have the luxury of choice.

I represent south Belfast, long known as the most diverse and integrated part of Northern Ireland, and proudly home to people from all around the world. As the MP, I am often contacted by people regarding their asylum claims, and the numbers have spiked in the last year for reasons that include a post-covid backlog and being forced to apply retrospectively post arrival.

Figures from the Refugee Council indicate that the UK's asylum backlog has almost quadrupled in the last five years, from just under 30,000 in December 2017 to 122,000 in June 2022. The comparison over 10 years is even more stark. In December 2011, the number of people awaiting an initial decision was just 12,800. Freedom of information requests reveal that of those awaiting an initial decision, one third have been waiting one to three years, with a proportion waiting more than five years, which is the situation facing specific constituents of mine. That limbo period is a mental torment for people who are unable to participate properly in society, who have little recourse to public funds, and who are unable to work or start a business. Some three quarters of applicants are ultimately accepted as legitimately seeking asylum, but they are held back unnecessarily from beginning a new life.

Selectively leaked Home Office figures urge us all to look instead at those who do not have legitimate claims—a deflection and a demonisation strategy that many of us are used to in terms of the abuse of people who require social security support. The obvious way to address those who do not qualify for asylum is to process and reject their applications, but that is not as politically lucrative as rhetoric about invasion and overwhelm.

Home Office figures, to the extent that they are available by region, indicate that the number of people arriving in Northern Ireland seeking asylum has increased significantly since January 2021, and just over 1,000 people are currently in hotel accommodation. Around 15% of hotels in Belfast are now designated as contingency accommodation for asylum seekers. In Northern Ireland, the accommodation is run by Mears, a private company, for profit.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing the debate forward, and am glad to be here to support her. Home Office figures for the past year show that 2,010 asylum seekers received local authority support in Belfast—more than double the figure for last year. There have been numerous reports that, throughout Belfast and Northern Ireland, the conditions of some—but not all—of the homes asylum seekers have been given are damp, mouldy, dirty and not fit to live in. Does the hon. Lady agree that we must focus on ensuring that the homes we already have are safe and clean, before we focus our priorities on additional accommodation for asylum seekers, whose applications are, as she says, taking months to process?

Claire Hanna: There is no doubt that the public housing stock in Northern Ireland is inadequate and has been under-resourced for many decades. The hotels and dispersal accommodation are in many cases far from adequate. The hotel accommodation that we are discussing is far from the luxury that some people would want us to believe it is. I am pleased to say that

the hotels of which I am aware in Northern Ireland are themselves in decent physical order, but I understand that that is not always the case elsewhere.

The setting is often compared to prison because of the restrictions placed on residents, the overcrowding of rooms, and the disruption from fellow residents, among whom some mental ill health is inevitable given the circumstances. Children and adults share the same small spaces. In at least one hotel, offices have been converted into bedrooms. The overall atmosphere is described as chaotic and oppressive.

Behind the statistics is one of my constituents, Mustafa, who, since arriving in Northern Ireland in January this year, has been living in one room with his wife, Linda, and their three boys, who are aged five, six and 13. They spend most of their days in their room. They eat at set mealtimes, and are unable to choose what to eat. They are unable to have the simple family pleasure of shared mealtimes. They all have to go to bed at the same time, or lie in silence. Their movements outside the hotel are restricted by time and distance limits. That is as close to imprisonment as is possible without actually being incarcerated.

The experiences of individuals and children in contingency accommodation falls significantly short in key respects, which include the right to education, the right to play, the right to privacy, the right to family life, the right to health, freedom of assembly, effective participation in society, and respect for and opportunity to develop one's own culture. Families in the hotels do not have access to shared spaces for play, socialising or self-organisation. Many of the hotels lack proper outdoor space, and those in city centre hotels do not have access to play parks or other stimulating environments—Belfast city centre does not do well enough on green space. Children who do not have a place in school are particularly restricted in terms of age-appropriate activities. Many of those in contingency accommodation are from the continent of Africa, and they experience a much more restrictive and less supportive asylum process than new arrivals from Ukraine, for whom the situation is absolutely no picnic.

Mustafa and his family's situation is reflected hundreds of times over. One of the issues raised regularly with me is the atmosphere of fear and restriction in hotels. Indeed, when I visited a hotel a few weeks ago for a meeting with a constituent to discuss only their asylum application—no comment had been made to me about the accommodation—I was treated to an extremely frosty reception by a member of staff. I was told in no uncertain terms to leave the hotel, despite having been signed in and granted access by very courteous security guards. As we say in Belfast, I am big and ugly enough to look after myself and to deal with people, but I am genuinely concerned about the atmosphere that that creates for people who are fearful of getting on the wrong side of the system that will decide their future. Complaints processes are long and unwieldy, and it feels impossible for asylum seekers to effect positive change from within the system.

Ultimately, processing backlogs mean a lack of control or agency for people, in any area of their lives, for interminable periods of time. They elongate and exacerbate the worst experience of their lives. My caseworkers and I tried to seek updates about the growing backlog of applicants, and were increasingly met with silence or

[Claire Hanna]

oblique responses from the Home Office. Each new arrival essentially has to reinvent the wheel and chart their own course in terms of accessing information about public services and their basic financial entitlements. Financial restrictions mean that families cannot avail themselves of social or cultural activities and they cannot buy specific toiletries, clothes or other things for their children. The ban on the right to work for asylum seekers drives more people into destitution; it does nothing to help them integrate or to stand on their own feet, as people want. It makes little sense at a time when we know the UK's economy is being limited by skills and labour shortages.

I fully support campaigning by organisations, such as Participation and the Practice of Rights, for the right to work for asylum seekers who have been waiting for more than six months. I deeply regret that a well-supported and crafted cross-party amendment to the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 did not advance the issue.

A report from the Children's Law Centre in Northern Ireland earlier this year found that around 135 school-age children placed in accommodation had not been provided with school places. School places, when they are sorted, are temporary because of the temporary nature of accommodation, meaning that the children are unable to settle properly. I must commend a number of local schools that have really stepped up and truly wrapped their arms around those children and their families. Notably, in Belfast, Fane Street Primary School and Holy Rosary Primary have done so in a way that is genuinely inspiring and reassuring about the society we live in.

While the original sin in the asylum system is processing failures, the issues I have outlined also demonstrate fundamental failure by the Northern Ireland Executive, as was until last month, who are inadequately co-ordinating services that asylum seekers are entitled to in Northern Ireland. We are still without a proper refugee integration strategy, and efforts to address the needs of asylum seekers are piecemeal and largely reliant on voluntary and community organisations to lead and step into the breach.

The asylum seekers I speak to have their already restricted opportunities to leave their accommodation hampered by the worry that they might miss a call about their accommodation or another public service. That means they are cut off from the small number of services that are put in place for them. I wrote to the various Departments at different points this year, asking that Ministers—who were very much in post at the time—commit to engaging across Departments. I am afraid that I got fairly vague platitudes about working with the wider public and voluntary sectors. I am yet to see much evidence.

It does not have to be that way. Northern Ireland and the UK have a track record of successful co-ordination in welcoming asylum seekers. In 2015, Northern Ireland welcomed 1,800 Syrians under the Syrian vulnerable person relocation scheme. Through that scheme, families received support from a consortium of voluntary and statutory organisations, along with overwhelming support from the population in Northern Ireland. The scheme treated people with dignity and compassion; it ensured that they had access to the right to work, to public

services, to paperwork and to the right to family reunion. That shows that we do have the capacity and compassion to welcome and integrate asylum seekers.

In conclusion, I acknowledge that these are complex and, in many cases, expensive challenges. The Government have many competing priorities, and I reiterate that no one is suggesting that the UK takes all asylum seekers—we absolutely do not do that. While it is obvious that the contingency accommodation that we are contracting is inadequate, the underlying cause of those issues, and where the blame lies, is firmly at the feet of the Home Office. Hotel accommodation, even if it was well appointed and integrated with public services, is restrictive for normal family life. The Home Office has created and perpetuated the crisis through its hostile environment policy, which is penny wise and pound foolish. It has been through sheer, and fairly basic, incompetence.

It would suit the Home Office better to put in place rational, fair and humane ways to deal with backlog of claims, to provide safe and legal routes—including being able to apply from outside the UK—and to resource and expedite the integration of those granted asylum into society. That would allow them to work, fully participate and contribute positively to the economy, as other aspects of inward migration very clearly do.

Jim Shannon: The Syrian scheme, which the Government have been running for some time, has been an absolute success for us in Newtownards. I know we took only six families, but they integrated quickly and all the local community and church groups came together to make that happen. The families have excelled and are working. They are fully able to use the language and have integrated into society, so does the hon. Lady agree that there are examples of what can be done, and done well?

Claire Hanna: I thank the hon. Member for pointing that out. We have demonstrated that that is possible under the Northern Executive and a Conservative Government.

We want to see an end to the use of hotels for anything other than short-term stays, certainly for children and pregnant women. We need urgent improvement in living standards and atmosphere in Mears accommodation, and we need effective data sharing, co-ordination and co-operation between the Home Office, the Northern Ireland Departments and Northern Ireland public bodies in order to ensure access to services and support. To the limited extent that the UK is meeting its legal obligations and playing a constructive role in the world, we need to do it properly. We have shown we can do that, I believe the population wants us to do that, and we know the need is there, whether we want to do it or not.

11.15 am

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) for securing this debate, which is the first that we have had the pleasure to take part in together. It raises some important issues that I hope I can address over the course of my remarks.

As a country, we face a significant challenge in all parts of the United Kingdom. The confluence of record numbers of migrants crossing the channel in small

boats, with the schemes that the hon. Lady set out, such as the Homes for Ukraine scheme, the Syrian resettlement scheme and the Afghan resettlement scheme, has meant that over the course of a two or three-year period a very large number of individuals have arrived in the UK and now need our support in contingency accommodation.

In some cases, those with the right to remain here for a longer period, or indefinitely, also need support in order to have a full and fulfilling life in the United Kingdom. That has put immense pressure on our asylum system and on local government and devolved Administrations throughout the United Kingdom. That is the challenge that the Home Secretary and I are now grappling with.

Northern Ireland is not a full dispersal area for asylum seekers, as the hon. Lady will know. That means that the asylum seekers who are accommodated in Northern Ireland are almost exclusively, if not exclusively, those who have presented themselves and claimed asylum in Northern Ireland. The vast majority of those will have crossed the border from the Republic of Ireland in order to make their asylum application, which makes this a different situation to those found in the rest of the UK. Comparatively, that also means fewer individuals are claiming asylum and being accommodated in Northern Ireland than in some other parts of the UK. That does not mean that the issue is not serious or that the pressures on accommodating them in accordance with our statutory obligations are not significant.

We are taking a broad approach, on many different fronts. First, on the diplomatic front, we are working with partners, such as France and the Republic of Ireland, to try to discourage individuals from crossing the channel or the border, to break up the people smuggling gangs, which are particularly active on the continent and in the channel, and to create a system in which deterrence is a golden thread running through it and diffused throughout it, so that we are significantly less attractive as a destination for asylum seekers, particularly economic migrants, than our EU neighbours.

Claire Hanna: I appreciate the Minister setting out the context for the pressure on public services, but I draw attention to the years of inadequate investment in those public services and I dispute some of his figures about those arriving in Northern Ireland. Does he understand my point that, notwithstanding the challenges of providing accommodation and food needs, the core failure is in processing? The number of staff to process asylum seekers was higher in the past, and that is primarily where the Home Office is failing.

Robert Jenrick: I do not agree with the hon. Lady. It is not that I disagree with the fact that the backlog of cases has grown too large and now needs to be tackled, which I will come to in a moment, but these are the symptoms of the problem. The cause of the problem is record numbers of people choosing to come into the United Kingdom illegally and the consequence of that is the exact opposite of what the hon. Lady seeks to achieve, which is that those illegal migrants, the economic migrants in particular, are putting immense pressure on our system in all parts of the UK and making it difficult, and in some cases impossible, for us to treat people who are genuinely fleeing persecution,

war and human rights abuses in the manner that we would all wish to do as a big-hearted and welcoming country.

The hon. Lady is correct to say that the number of individuals waiting for their asylum cases to be processed is unacceptably high. That has risen over the course of the last three years for a range of reasons, some of which are related to a drop in productivity during the pandemic. We now need to change that. My role and that of the Home Secretary is to ensure we raise productivity in all the Home Office's offices, including those personnel based in Northern Ireland, and ensure that we return to at least the levels of productivity we had prior to the pandemic.

We have already done a pilot of that approach at our Leeds office, which has seen a significant increase in the speed of processing. We are rolling that out now across the whole of the country. This is not a matter of resources or the number of decision makers. The part of the Home Office that handles this now has greater resources than prior to the pandemic and we have more than 1,000 individuals making the decisions, with that number rapidly rising to a target of 1,500. The issue, I am afraid, is one of leadership and productivity and that is what we are now setting out to address.

Coming to the specific issue of the accommodation that the hon. Lady raises, I want to make a few points that provide background and which I hope are helpful. First, having reviewed the accommodation throughout Northern Ireland in preparation for the debate, it is true to say that it is heavily centred on Belfast and in particular on the hon. Lady's constituency. Across the UK, one of our objectives is to move to fairer and more equitable distribution so that individual cities or towns are not facing a disproportionate impact. There needs to be an effort to encourage more parts of Northern Ireland to accommodate asylum seekers.

Claire Hanna: Of course, I will make the point that almost the only way for people to arrive is illegally, due to the absence of safe and legal routes. Can the Home Office publish the data about arrival? Can the Minister also outline the efforts made to engage with other councils and areas in south Belfast and more widely than Belfast? He characterises it as a disproportionate pressure, but the Syrian scheme showed that there is willingness to take on and there is capacity. However, that has to be led by the Home Office, which controls dispersal and the resources that come with it.

Robert Jenrick: I can only speak to the time that I have been in position, which is only around a month. We have engaged with local authorities throughout the United Kingdom to explain the challenges that are being faced and encourage them to play their fair part in the solution. Yesterday, I held a call with the leaders and chief executives of all local authorities throughout the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. In the absence of the Executive, my officials are actively engaging with civil servants and with local leaders and partners to encourage other parts of Northern Ireland to play a greater role.

We have instituted mandatory dispersal, by which we are encouraging children and adults to be accommodated by all local authorities throughout the United Kingdom. We have put in place a financial package to encourage

[Robert Jenrick]

local authorities to do that. That amounts to £3,500 per asylum-seeking adult and a more substantial package for unaccompanied children, with which there is a particular problem. Indeed, we are looking for state and private foster carers and children's homes to find places for those vulnerable young people so we can get them out of hotels as swiftly as possible. If there is anything the hon. Lady and her colleagues can do to encourage local partners throughout Northern Ireland to step up and find other contingency accommodation—particularly dispersal accommodation, which is the ultimate solution to the hotels—that would be very much appreciated. The Department is understandably hamstrung by the lack of an Executive to deal with directly in the way we would wish.

The medium-term strategy to exit hotels, beyond reducing the backlog and bearing down on the number of individuals coming to the UK illegally, is to move to a model whereby we use hotels judiciously in exceptional circumstances; find a greater pool of dispersal accommodation in all parts of the United Kingdom, working with local authorities and relevant public bodies; and find more sustainable, somewhat larger, sites, such as disused student accommodation, where we can provide suitable accommodation for asylum seekers that is decent but not luxurious and provides good value for money for the taxpayer. We will provide good engagement prior to arrival so that the wraparound services that the hon. Lady mentioned in respect of health and education are constantly improved, as appropriate.

The hon. Lady and several colleagues from both sides of the House and all parts of the United Kingdom have raised engagement with me in my short tenure in the Department. At times, there has been limited engagement by the Home Office prior to choosing hotels and bringing in asylum seekers, and we need to change that. We have now instituted basic performance standards whereby

the Home Office and its partners will engage with relevant local bodies at least 24 hours before individuals are sited in that hotel or other contingency accommodation. We will involve all the relevant agencies that are needed to ensure that those individuals' arrival and stay are as successful as possible.

That is a first step, and we want to progressively improve that in the weeks and months to come to the point where local authorities and relevant public bodies are included in the decision-making process at the earliest opportunity. The Home Office—Whitehall—is clearly not best placed to choose the right contingency accommodation in particular cities and towns across the country, such as Belfast, and I believe we can improve that.

I have also met the suppliers this week, including Mears, to discuss how they can improve their engagement with Members of Parliament and local representatives. They have committed to step up their engagement and ensure that for every building that is occupied, such as a hotel, they provide a named point of contact so that the hon. Lady and her local partners can have proper engagement in an ongoing fashion with the people running the building. That would enable her to raise concerns as swiftly as possible with the relevant people so that, where appropriate, improvements can be made.

I hope that has provided some context to the Home Office's approach. I appreciate the hon. Lady's concerns and I take them seriously, even if we have a different attitude to the broader question of asylum. We want to ensure that we meet our statutory obligations to provide decent accommodation to all those who are in our care for as long as they are in the United Kingdom. I am very happy to work with her, her local partners and residents of Belfast to improve the situation.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

NHS Staffing Levels

[PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered NHS staffing levels.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to all the nurses, doctors and other medical professionals—indeed, everybody who works in the NHS—for the work they do to look after patients and keep us all safe.

I have been overwhelmed by the number of organisations that have shown interest in this debate and have shared details of how the NHS staffing crisis is impacting on the people they represent. They are too numerous to mention here, but they include the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of General Practitioners, Versus Arthritis, Cancer Research UK, Unite the union, Parkinson's UK, the Royal College of Midwives and many others. It is clear that there is insufficient capacity in the NHS in England to meet the needs of patients.

The NHS staffing crisis is a direct result of the failure of Conservative Governments to plan and deliver the workforce that we need. The crisis is not just about the impact of the pandemic; it predates that. In June this year, there were more than 132,000 vacancies in the NHS in England, which is up from around 98,000 the previous year and from around 105,000 in March. When we look specifically at registered nursing staff, as of June there were over 46,000 vacancies. Alarming, that is almost 8,000 more than in March. For medical staff, there were over 10,500 vacancies in June, which is around 2,500 more than in March.

By way of comparison, in December 2019 there were around 38,000 nursing vacancies and more than 8,800 medical staff vacancies. What was already an extremely serious situation before the pandemic has become worse. Staffing shortages create stress for NHS workers, and delays and deteriorating quality and safety for patients. As well as vacancies, waiting times for treatment and emergency services have continued to soar. Last month, of the nearly 1.4 million people who visited major A&E departments, more than 550,000 waited more than four hours from arrival to admission, transfer or discharge. That is 45.2% of attendees, which is way short of the target of 95% to be seen in four hours. In December 2019, 31.4% waited for more than four hours. Again, an already serious situation before covid has got worse.

As of last month, a total of 7.1 million people in England were waiting to start routine hospital treatment. More than 400,000 people had been waiting more than 52 weeks, and more than 2,000 longer than two years. Behind those statistics are huge numbers of people waiting in pain and anxiety. Cancer Research UK points out that, in September of this year, only 60.5% of patients started treatment within 62 days of an urgent referral, against a target of 85%. That means that, in September alone, around 6,000 people waited for more than 62 days for their cancer treatment to start. Even before the pandemic, cancer patients were waiting too long for diagnosis and treatment. The 62-day target has not been met since 2015.

On the Conservatives' watch, millions of patients are being deprived of the timely treatment that they desperately need. Because of the unacceptable delays, some are paying for expensive private healthcare, and many are distressed to do so, because they believe in a publicly owned, universal, comprehensive national health service. They have been failed by Conservative Governments.

The staffing crisis is having a devastating impact on retention. Last month, the *Health Service Journal* reported that a record number of NHS workers voluntarily resigned from their jobs during the first quarter of this financial year. Almost 35,000 resigned voluntarily, which is up from around 28,000 during the same period in 2021 and around 19,000 in 2020. The most common reason for leaving during quarter 1 of 2021-22 was work-life balance, which almost 7,000 NHS workers cited as their reason for leaving.

A few months ago, I met with members of the Royal College of Nursing. They told me about the incredible amount of pressure that they are under because of staff shortages. They also told me of nurses suffering financial hardship. Some are going to food banks, some are unable to afford to drive to work, and some are leaving the profession to work in chain stores for better pay. However, it is not just about pay. The nurses told me that they often simply do not have enough colleagues to work alongside them. That is extremely stressful for them, and dangerous and deeply unfair for patients.

I turn now to industrial action. NHS staff care deeply about their patients, but they can also see that the NHS is at breaking point. Earlier this month, the Royal College of Nursing voted to take strike action in its fight for fair pay and safe staffing. That is unprecedented and has not been done lightly. The RCN has been clear: its members have voted for fair pay for nursing, safe patient care and to protect patients.

Numerous other organisations, representing thousands of workers, are also balloting for industrial action, including Unite the Union, Unison, the Royal College of Midwives and the GMB union. The Conservative Government's failure to address the NHS staffing crisis is putting those working in the service under immense pressure and, in some instances, putting patients at risk. It is notable that, in a poll of 6,000 adults, carried out on behalf of Unite, 73% of respondents supported NHS and careworkers receiving pay rises that kept up with the cost of living. The Government should take note.

We cannot discuss the NHS staffing crisis without highlighting the Conservatives' privatisation agenda, because it does impact on people working in the service. The Health and Care Act 2022 split the NHS in England into 42 statutory integrated care systems, each comprising an integrated care board and integrated care partnership.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for making such a poignant and important speech, and for securing this debate, because we are all grappling with the issue. Does she agree that the staff in the NHS do their very best, but the future planning of the workforce is also an issue? We do not have enough staff for the future workforce plan. That is particularly the case in mental health and learning disabilities. I read that 215 young people took their lives in 2021, the highest figure since records began. Is that a concern to her, because I think it is for most of us in the House? I am sure that, in the excellent speech she is making, she will want to highlight that.

Margaret Greenwood: The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point. There can be no more poignant and devastating example of what this crisis is leading to.

The Health and Care Act is a privatising piece of legislation that opens the door to private companies having a greater say in the delivery of health care. Guidance by NHS England, while the Act was going through Parliament, stated that it would enable integrated care boards to delegate functions to providers, including devolving budgets to provider collaboratives. Provider collaboratives are partnership arrangements involving at least two trusts, and they can include representation from the private or independent sector.

As we now know, the delegation of commissioning from ICBs to provider collaboratives will definitely go ahead. That represents not only the opportunity for the privatisation of the NHS, but clearly has implications for NHS staff. I am concerned that a situation may well arise where a provider collaborative decides to commission services from the private sector, instead of from the NHS provider that is currently delivering the service. In that instance, NHS staff may well find that their jobs are lost from the NHS, and that equivalent work is available only in the private sector, on poorer pay and conditions of service.

The Health and Care Act, which was passed by the Conservative Government earlier this year, has the potential to undermine national collective bargaining, and the pay and terms and conditions of NHS staff. It also undermines the concept of the NHS as a publicly owned organisation that has served us so well since 1948. The Act prohibits the chair of an ICB from approving or appointing someone as a member of any committee or sub-committee that exercises commissioning functions, if the chair considers that the appointment could reasonably be regarded as undermining the independence of the health service, because of the candidate's involvement with the private healthcare sector or otherwise. However, that is clearly open to interpretation. It by no means rules out people with interests in private healthcare from sitting on those sub-committees.

If we are serious about providing governance that rules out the possibility of the private sector influencing the expenditure of public money, an organisation carrying out the functions of an ICB on its behalf should be a statutory NHS body. It is a great pity that the Government did not legislate for that, despite an amendment in my name calling for it, which had cross-party support.

Private companies can also have influence through integrated care partnerships, which are required to prepare a strategy setting out how the assessed needs of its area are to be met. ICBs must have regard to a strategy drawn up by an ICP, which I am concerned might be influenced by private companies. Of course, the responsibility of a private company is to make money for shareholders; it is not to support a publicly owned, publicly run national health service.

Other provisions in the Act also have serious implications for staff. The Act allows for a profession that is currently regulated to be removed from statutory regulation. That is deeply concerning. Once a profession is deregulated, we can expect the level of expertise in that field to decline over time, alongside the status and pay of those carrying out those important roles. Deregulation also brings with it serious long-term implications for the health and safety of patients.

The Act also provides for the revoking of the national tariff and its replacement with a new NHS payment scheme. Engagement on the NHS payment scheme is still under way, with a statutory consultation due to begin shortly. I have long been concerned that, given the requirement in the Act for NHS England to consult with each relevant provider before publishing the NHS payment scheme, including private providers, this may well be a mechanism through which the Government will give private health companies the opportunity to undercut the NHS. If that happens, I believe that one of the inevitable outcomes would be an erosion of the scope of "Agenda for Change", as healthcare that should be provided by the NHS is increasingly delivered by the private sector.

In that event, NHS staff may then find themselves forced out of jobs that are currently on "Agenda for Change" rates of pay, pensions and other terms and conditions, with only private-sector jobs with potentially lesser pay and conditions available for them to apply for if they wish to continue working in the health service. Just like the provision around provider collaboratives, that would appear to hold risk for NHS staff and their pay and conditions. As such, I would be grateful if the Minister will guarantee that the pay rates of "Agenda for Change", pensions, and other terms and conditions of all eligible current NHS staff will not be undermined as a result of the adoption of the NHS payment scheme. Can he also confirm that trade unions, staff representative bodies and all the royal colleges will be consulted before the NHS payment scheme is published, as Ministers in the other place assured us during the passage of the Act?

I understand that the Government are to publish a comprehensive NHS workforce plan next year, including independently verified workforce forecasts of the number of doctors, nurses and other professionals we will need in five, 10 and 15 years' time. Such a plan is long overdue, so can the Minister provide some further details about when we will see it? Will that plan also include details of the numbers of staff we will need in the social care sector, where there is also a workforce crisis that is intricately linked to that in the NHS? Will the Minister set out what measures he is taking to address the staffing crisis this winter?

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The reality is that today, we are training NHS professionals in the same professional silos as we did 100 years ago. Medicine has moved on massively, so in light of the fact that a new workforce plan is being drawn up, is it not right that those professions are revisited to ensure we have a workforce fit for the future, as opposed to doing things just because we have done them for so many years?

Margaret Greenwood: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an interesting and detailed point born of her experience. The Minister should take note.

To conclude, since 2010, Conservative Governments have let the crisis in NHS staffing develop. Instead of doing the important business of Government and bringing forward a timely workforce plan and a properly funded training regime, they have focused their energy on not one, but two, major reorganisations of the national health service designed to open it up to privatisation. Instead of tending to the needs of the workforce and the needs of patients, they have been priming the pump for shareholders. The NHS must remain a comprehensive

universal service, publicly owned, paid for through direct taxation and free at the point of use for all who need it. That very concept is under threat: it has been reported this week that NHS leaders in Scotland have discussed abandoning the founding principles of the NHS by having the wealthy pay for treatment, thus creating a two-tier system. Not only would that be a betrayal of its founding principles, but it would also bring in costly administrative processes that are not currently needed, as patients would need to be means-tested.

The NHS is also under threat from this Conservative Government's failure to get a grip on the staffing crisis, and from their privatisation agenda. This attack on the fundamental principles of a comprehensive, universal, publicly owned national health service, free to all who need it and paid for through direct taxation, has left patients neglected and staff overworked and underpaid. Patients, the NHS, and all who work in the service deserve better. The Government must come forward as a matter of urgency with a credible plan to put things right for NHS staff and set out how they are going to deal with the crisis this winter, and Ministers must give NHS workers a fair pay rise, protect NHS services, and ensure staff safety.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 4 o'clock. I am obliged to call Front Benchers no later than 3.27 pm. The guideline limits are 10 minutes for the Scottish National party, 10 minutes for His Majesty's Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Margaret Greenwood will have three minutes to sum up the debate at the end. Nine speakers are seeking to take part so we have a time limit of four and a half minutes. I will be grateful if hon. Members stick to that.

2.45 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for this important debate on a subject that is close to my heart. I have many friends and family who work in the NHS and I speak to them regularly about the severe pressures they are under. I doubt there is a single Member of Parliament whose inbox is not full of casework, both from patients whose treatment has been delayed because of staff shortages and from overstretched NHS workers who are frustrated that, with the best will in the world, they simply cannot meet the demands they face each and every day.

I want to mention a couple of the emails I have received in recent weeks. Eamon works in the NHS and told me:

"After over 10 years of underfunding, I see my colleagues and staff within the hospitals I visit every day look more and more dejected, run down, insulted and demoralised. Where once was pride, a smile, laughter and camaraderie, there is now worry, depression and a feeling of hopelessness."

Tracy expressed the feelings of many long-serving health workers when she told me:

"Some of us cannot cope on the wages we earn and are considering leaving the NHS. We cannot afford to lose any more staff—we are struggling to staff wards as it is. I work six days a week to get a decent wage. I'm 60 years old and I have worked all my life. This can't be right."

Eamon and Tracy are hard-working professionals, dedicated to helping the patients in their care. That people like them should be so worn down and unhappy at work that they are considering leaving should be a wake-up call to the Government. Yet all we hear from the Prime Minister down is that decent wages for nurses and other healthcare workers are unaffordable. Is it any wonder that people look elsewhere in the economy and see employers doing what the Government should be doing in the NHS? That is, offering higher wages and better working conditions to help recruit and retain the staff they need.

In my constituency of Batley and Spen, Amazon is seeking to build a huge new warehouse development. I am opposing the plan for a number of reasons, not least the damage it would do to the health and wellbeing of local residents and the impact on the already-overloaded transport network. However, I also have serious reservations about the number and type of jobs such a development would create and I worry that our exhausted NHS workforce may be tempted by such developments, whatever the reality. We cannot afford for our nurses, porters, drivers and other workers who keep the NHS going to be lured away by the promise of higher wages in other sectors. We need them.

The impact of staff shortages has already led to vital services in my constituency being significantly reduced, leaving patients having to travel long distances to access care that, until recently, was available in their own communities. Such local care is really important. To take just one example, the Bronte Birth Centre was a lifeline for expectant mums, but it was forced to close—hopefully, temporarily. However, some fear it could become permanent, because the centre simply cannot get the maternity staff it needs. A recent advert for midwives did not lead to a single application.

NHS management is doing its best, looking to support recent graduates, attract back retired staff and recruit internationally. However, it is clear that the fundamental problem remains the same across the health service: low morale, wages that fail to keep up with prices and working conditions that are getting progressively worse, month after month and year after year. We remain incredibly proud of the NHS, especially on this side of the House, but I accept in other parties too. After 12 years of under-investment, it is now stretched to breaking point. Unless we take urgent action to strengthen the workforce, restore the pride that NHS staff have in their ability to do their jobs and properly reward them for their work, we are putting the future of our NHS at serious risk. I hope we can all agree that that is something we must avoid at all costs.

2.49 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Hollobone. It is a great pleasure to be part of this important debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for securing it and for setting the dire scene in the NHS.

I will use my speech to talk about when I was a practice manager before I became an MP, and I want to speak about the way in which racism and discrimination affects the wellbeing of black and minority ethnic staff. Some 22.4% of NHS staff in England are from BME

[Kate Osamor]

backgrounds, so they are disproportionately represented in the NHS but are under-represented in senior leadership. If we want an acceptable level of NHS staffing, it is crucial that racism and discrimination against staff from BME backgrounds is properly challenged.

Earlier this year, the BME Leadership Network published the “Shattered Hopes” report, which was based on surveys and roundtables of staff, revealing results that were shocking to read. It found that more than half of BME NHS leaders have considered leaving the NHS in the last three years because of their experiences of racism, and that colleagues, leaders and managers were a more common source of racist treatment than members of the public, which is truly shocking.

I want to provide the Minister with some recommendations, which I hope he will be able to address in his summing up. First, it goes without saying that the Government must give a pay rise to doctors, nurses and all staff in the NHS that is at least above the current rate of inflation, to protect their standards of living and to ensure the retention of staff. Secondly, we must ensure that bursaries for nursing students are restored so that more people—particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds—can access training. Lastly, the Government need to provide a renewed commitment to ensure that the NHS delivers on its commitment to combat institutional racism alongside tackling health inequalities.

We need an expanded training programme to truly tackle discrimination within the NHS. Without that commitment, countless staff will have no choice but to quit working for the NHS.

2.52 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your guidance again, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for securing a really important debate.

I want to say a massive thank you to NHS and care staff. Undoubtedly, every year is a tough one for those working in this area, but the last few years have been incredibly demanding. The pandemic has taken its toll on people’s mental and physical health, and has led to real attrition within the various clinical and non-clinical services. It is worth bearing in mind how much worse it would have been had we not collectively taken the right decision to try to tackle the pandemic early on. Nevertheless, it has been incredibly hard.

I will focus on a few areas that are significant for NHS staffing, starting with dentistry. It is worth bearing in mind that we all pay our taxes, so 100% of my tax-paying constituents have paid for NHS dentistry, but only about a third of them are getting it, including roughly half of the children. At the moment—I have checked—there is not a single NHS dental place anywhere in the entire county of Cumbria, which is a disgrace. That could be solved in no small part if the Government were to address the issue of the treadmill of units of dental activity. If it were done differently, it would not necessarily cost the Government any more money to make sure that they do not push dentists into a position where they feel that they have no alternative professionally

than to leave the NHS, that we bring back the people who have left, and that we value the ones we have working within it.

Secondly, I want to talk about GPs. The simple reality is that we have far fewer GPs entering the service than we need. Many rural communities in Britain, such as mine, have a smaller surgery population-wise because of the vast area that they cover. We are currently dealing with the potential closure of the Ambleside and Hawkshead medical practices—the Central Lakes Medical Group. It is out to tender at the moment, because the Government removed what was called the minimum practice income guarantee, a sum of money that made small rural surgeries financially sustainable. Their removal has led to three closures that I can think of in Cumbria—one in Eden and two in South Lakeland. A relatively small amount of money would keep those surgeries sustainable and make sure that we kept people working at them. Otherwise, we have NHS staff who are determined to work and serve those communities who simply find that they cannot.

Nothing is more important to solving the NHS staffing crisis than tackling care—we have talked about that a lot—and it is outrageous that the Government have chosen to kick dealing with that issue into the long grass for another two years. We have 32% bed-blocking in the hospitals of south Cumbria at the moment. The reason why is obvious: there are not enough care packages to help people when they leave hospital, because there are not enough carers. The impact on hospital capacity, on the capacity of A&E, on ambulances that take so much longer to drop off their patients and therefore take longer to respond to calls, and the lives put at risk, is blindingly obvious. For the Government to delay dealing with care, and to think it is delayable for two years is not a tough decision for them. It is a tough decision for the millions of people who will be affected and for the tens of thousands of people working in our care sector.

The lack of availability of affordable homes for care workers and NHS workers in communities like mine is also worth bearing in mind; that is a major reason why there are not enough staff working in health and social care. We now understand that the Government will kick the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill into the grass on the other side of Christmas. That was an opportunity for the Government to decide that they would change the law to protect homes for local occupancy.

My final comment is on the cancer staffing situation. We currently have an outrageous situation where, in the south of Cumbria, 43% of people diagnosed with cancer are not getting their first treatment for two months, and 62% in north Cumbria are not getting their treatment for two months. That is an outrage. It is costing lives. Undoubtedly, staffing is a major part of that. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for radiotherapy, and we are to meet the Minister or his colleagues soon. Can I press him for a date?

In the meantime, I will share one important statistic with him. Radiotherapy UK surveyed 622 radiotherapy professionals—10% of the entire workforce nationwide—and 94% of them felt that the Government did not understand the impact of the current situation on their service; 72% felt that NHS senior managers did not either. As a consequence, we are losing people from the industry. We need a workforce plan specifically for cancer.

I hope the Minister will agree to meet with me and the APPG soon so that we can give him the all-party manifesto on radiotherapy, which will solve some of the problems and give those working in the NHS, particularly in cancer, some hope for the future.

2.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for leading the debate. Like her, I acknowledge and appreciate the incredible work of all our NHS healthcare professionals in all areas of our health system over the last number of decades, especially throughout the pandemic, when we appreciated them even more than normal. I place on the record my genuine thanks to them for their commitment and their efforts through the covid crisis, which will continue to have impacts on the efficiency of our NHS for some time.

Our national health service is one of a kind and we must do everything in our power to protect it and ensure that it is given what it needs to ensure its success. Just yesterday in the main Chamber, I asked the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about retaining our nurses. How we do that is quite simple: we pay them the wages that they need. There is something drastically wrong if someone can become agency staff and get better wages for doing the same job. I am always respectful to the Minister, and I do not say that to chasten or to be aggressive, but we really do need to pay our nurses what they deserve. Perhaps the Minister can get back to us on that point.

It is very challenging to cover all the issues about NHS staffing. The NHS is one of the largest employers in the world, with more than 1.3 million staff, with 13,000 of them working back home. There is no secret that there are staffing issues for many different reasons. I have heard before from younger people that the educational process to becoming a nurse is purely based on exam results. I understand the need for training. Nursing, mental health nursing, medicine and dentistry require degrees from universities. Many universities refuse to take students who do not achieve high grades in their entry requirements. Perhaps it is time to look at whether, if the grades are not achievable for them but they have an interest in the subject matter, they should be given training to deliver that. We do not always have to aim for the gold star ones. There are people who might not achieve all of the grades that they should, but could still be darn good nurses and do well. I ask the Minister if he could give us his thoughts on that.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) mentioned GPs. Back home, GPs are really important. If one or two fall away from the local health clinics and surgeries, we automatically have a crisis among our GPs. So, let us encourage more GPs to come in. To do that, we will probably have to pay them better too, so that they do not wish to go anywhere else—overseas or wherever. We have all heard about the horror stories that illustrate their reasons for doing that.

I heard from a constituent just last week who was in a car accident. Her car was written off, but, luckily, there were no life-threatening injuries. However, the ambulance came and she waited in the ambulance queue for eight hours. She was not allowed to move from the stretcher, was not able to use the toilet, and had no water to drink.

That is just an example of some of the crises we have. That is not the Minister's fault—it is a devolved matter and I understand that—but it is just an illustration, and I suspect that other Members will have their own examples.

I would make a plea on behalf of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which has stated that, over the past year, the number of full-time-equivalent consultant child and adolescent psychiatrists in the NHS has declined, while referrals to child and adolescent mental health services have increased by 24%. We have countless debates in this place relating to better provisions for children's and teenagers' mental health, and the RCP tells us that there are simply not enough psychiatrists. Again, I am throwing this at the Minister at very short notice, but I know that his responses are always very helpful. I ask for some help in raising that.

I am also aware of the challenges that the staff face. I thank each and every one of them—I thank them and I praise them. They go home after their shifts, tired and disheartened. The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) mentioned that earlier on. It is the truth. With that in mind, we must do more.

I very much welcome the additional money allocated in the autumn Budget, and the Barnett consequential means that we will get £650 million. That is a massive help, and I understand that. I certainly hope that that will shield the NHS from inflammatory staffing pressures, but I hope that the Minister can undertake discussions with the devolved Administrations on this issue, and on how we can do it better together. I am always very conscious that the Minister is a gentleman and responds well; I very much look forward to his reply.

3.2 pm

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on bringing forward this important and timely debate. In all areas of healthcare, it is incredibly important that our NHS is able to cope with the growing demand for its services.

Across the board, staffing shortages in the health service, let down by 12 years of Tory chaos, are endemic. In nursing, 40,000 registered nurses in England have left the NHS in the past year. We have lost 4,700 GPs in the last decade, and hundreds of practices have closed since the last election. That has resulted in GP surgeries being massively overstretched, such as the one in my constituency that has 3,200 people on its books.

The cuts are not just numbers; they have a real impact on people's lives. One of my constituents is a PE teacher with a chronic knee injury. She was unable to book a GP appointment and could not get an MRI scan. So that she could continue to work safely, she felt that she had no option but to book it privately, costing her £300.

In mental health services, local trusts are seriously struggling with a lack of capacity. Last year, around 2.8 million people had contact with NHS mental health, learning disability and autism services in England. That is around 5% of the population, and my city of Birmingham had the third highest percentage of adults in contact with those services. Despite the obvious problems in this area, the Royal College of Physicians has reported that, nationally, we can expect an increase of just 4,000 more mental health nurses by 2024, when more than 12,000 are required to meet demand. We know that the

[Mrs Paulette Hamilton]

pressures that hospitals face lead them to rely on NHS staff banks and agency workers to cover for the lack of capacity. This year, 83% of nursing staff said that staffing levels on their last shift were not sufficient to meet patient needs safely and effectively.

The new Chancellor of the Exchequer said in 2015:

“For too long staffing agencies have been able to rip off the NHS by charging extortionate hourly rates which cost billions of pounds a year and undermine staff working hard to deliver high-quality care.”

However, this autumn’s Budget pledge to increase NHS spending by £3.3 billion next year is not enough to plug the £7 billion shortfall that the NHS could experience.

I was a nurse for 25 years. I understand how important it is for the NHS to have sufficient levels of staff, and the disastrous effect that staffing shortages have. Nurses work long hours day in, day out, to support people all across the UK. They often do this on very low pay, and we know that many hospitals across the country have opened food banks specifically to feed their staff. After 12 years of mismanagement by the Tory Government, it is no wonder that our nurses have been driven to take industrial action for the first time. As I said earlier, nurses are leaving the profession in droves; some 40,000 quit last year. I for one do not blame them. I cannot say, hand on heart and with 25 years of nursing experience, that I could do the job now. The blame for the mess lies squarely with the Conservatives.

3.6 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for securing this important debate.

As the newly elected chair of the all-party parliamentary pharmacy group, I want to take this opportunity to outline some of the main concerns facing staff in that sector. Before being elected to this House, I worked in the NHS as a senior cancer pharmacist, and I still regularly volunteer at my local hospital, Coventry and Warwickshire hospital, in cancer care. The opportunity to serve on the frontline of our health service was and continues to be a privilege that I feel every time I set foot in the hospital. There are very few more rewarding things in life than being able to help those in need and provide care for patients at what are often very difficult moments of their lives.

Because of that, I know first hand how important pharmacists are to the provision of healthcare across the country, yet the Government continue to fail those key workers. A recent study published by the Pharmacists’ Defence Association revealed that almost a quarter of pharmacists want to leave their current sector and move to another part of pharmacy and, of those, almost a third are considering leaving pharmacy altogether. As with most healthcare professionals, low and stagnating pay and working conditions are the main reason for seeking a change. With just one in 10 pharmacists feeling that they get adequate breaks, it is no wonder that so many are looking to leave. The longer the Government ignore the exodus of pharmacists to other industries, the more money it will cost to recruit and train new staff.

As a member of the Health and Social Care Committee, I was part of a team who put together earlier this year a workforce report that recommended that the Government better utilise the pharmacy workforce and, in doing so, optimise workload across primary care, reduce pressures on general practice and hospitals, and support integrated care systems. Community pharmacists are willing and eager to take on more responsibilities in order to become the first port of call for patients and take the pressure off overburdened GP surgeries. The Government talk the talk about investing in our NHS, but if they are unwilling to take the necessary steps, waiting times and patient dissatisfaction will continue to grow.

As part of our report, the Select Committee recommended that pharmacists must have clear structures for professional career development into advanced practice. The Government have completely ignored that call; and I know, from my own experience, that far too many in the industry feel that those opportunities are sparse at the best of times. Like everyone else, pharmacists need to know that there are chances for growth and the acquisition of new skills in different areas. If the Government are serious about supporting pharmacists, as they have said repeatedly, that must be a priority.

Retaining pharmacists is also vital to the long-term health of the NHS as a whole. Until the Government tackle the issues of low pay, poor working conditions and a lack of opportunities for career progression, I fear that we will see a weaker and weaker pharmacy sector, which none of us can afford. Sadly, the issue that I have outlined is not specific to pharmacists but applies to all healthcare professionals.

I turn to cancer waiting times in my constituency of Coventry North West. In August, only 57% of patients at University Hospital Coventry, where I volunteer, began their treatment within two months of being referred by their GP, but the NHS target is that the trust should aim to see 85% of patients within 62 days. That simply is not good enough. Cancer patients in Coventry were put on the backburner during the pandemic, and as a result we see more and more cases of late-stage cancer. Those patients need to be seen urgently, and simply cannot wait. Many pancreatic cancer patients in Coventry have been in touch to let me know of their anger at being forced to wait so long. They are being let down.

I know how hard NHS staff work. Despite their efforts, cancer waiting time targets continue to be missed. Unless the Government invest in our beloved institution, we will continue to see more of the same. We need to strengthen our NHS workforce. We need to be able to invest in retaining the staff that we currently have. We also need to pay our nurses, and all healthcare professionals, adequately and appropriately for their hard work and dedication.

I thank all the NHS staff in Coventry, and across the country, for their dedication and hard work, and for all that they do to look after our loved ones. Lastly, I ask the Minister to meet me to discuss the future of pharmacies and the workforce.

3.11 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for bringing forward this important and timely debate.

The reality is that the national health service that we clapped for, that we care so deeply for and that is the last line of defence for our families and loved ones is literally at breaking point. There may well be some dividing lines between voters, but when it comes to the NHS, whether someone votes red, green, blue or yellow, the NHS matters to them. Yet 12 years of Conservative Government has managed to bring the NHS to its knees.

Right now, in Bradford and across Britain, patients find it impossible to get a GP appointment. People suffering from heart attacks or strokes are waiting longer than one hour for an ambulance. Some 401,537 patients have been waiting for more than a year for an operation, and “24 Hours in A&E” is no longer just a TV programme: it is the patients’ everyday experience. That brings great shame on us all.

Just today, Labour’s shadow Health Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), highlighted the case of a 16-year-old who has been given a hospital appointment in 2025—in three years’ time. Will that 16-year-old put their health and life on hold for three years? Similarly, an elderly lady in my constituency of Bradford West had an operation this year that was three years on from when it was originally planned. The pain and suffering that she endured while she waited was unbelievable.

One of the key reasons for all that is, of course, staff shortages in the NHS, which all Members have highlighted. Twelve years of Conservative Government have left the NHS understaffed and unable to deliver timely care. Under the Conservatives, medical school places fell by 30% this summer—thousands more straight-A students turned away from training and becoming doctors when we need them more than ever. The latest NHS Digital vacancy statistics show 132,139 vacancies across England on 30 June 2022. For registered nursing staff alone, there was a vacancy rate of 11.8%, or more than 46,000. That is an increase from March 2022, when the rate was 10.3%, or over 38,000. In my local hospital in Bradford, that rate increases to more than 15%. One senior clinician told me today that if she had a magic wand, she would scrap university fees so that she could open up the profession for people who cannot afford to go into nursing.

Last year’s NHS staff survey showed the level of concern about the impact of NHS staff shortages in Bradford. When asked to respond to the statement:

“There are enough staff at this organisation for me to do my job properly”,

only 15.3% of respondents at Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust said they agreed or strongly agreed—down from 32.2% in 2020. The responsibility for that lies firmly at the feet of this Government. The NHS is now approaching winter with the longest waiting times in its history and record shortages of staff. NHS staff are slogging their guts out, but there are simply not enough of them.

Labour has a plan to combat the crisis in the NHS. The next Labour Government will double the number of district nurses qualifying every year, train more than 5,000 new health visitors, create an additional 10,000 nursing and midwifery places every year and double the number of medical school places that so we have the

doctors we need in our NHS. It is time we had a party in government that is serious about protecting the NHS, not just clapping for it.

Finally, I put on the record my thanks to local NHS staff in my constituency—from those working in GP practices to staff nurses and doctors, and from health visitors to those providing care at home, including all the key workers we clapped for who provided home care and gave people dignity in their own homes, even during the covid pandemic. As my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) rightly pointed out, doctors and nurses have burnt out. They have told me that they have not recuperated from the impact of covid, let alone prepared for the coming winter. The mental health stress put on our nurses and doctors is not okay. The Government need to step up and do something about that.

3.16 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your stewardship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for initiating the debate.

Where do I begin on this subject? It is difficult to know because Members have brought forward a plethora of information, but I will start with the House of Commons Library briefing, which is always a good source of information, and its research is based on independent sources. It says that the Health and Social Care Committee has said:

“The National Health Service and the social care sector are facing the greatest workforce crisis in their history.”

The NHS, which is the best part of 80 years old, is facing the worst crisis in its history, with a vacancy rate of 9.7%, which is 132,139 members of staff.

There is significant shortfall in staff across the piece. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) talked about vacancies in pharmacy, dentistry, radiology, podiatry, ambulance staff, back-office staff—as those people who are at the heart of the service and keep it going are disparagingly called—cleaners and porters. Everybody says the whole NHS is under huge stress.

Rachael Maskell: I want to highlight the neuroradiology profession and the reality that staff shortages have an impact on clinical outcomes. Hardly any of our NHS trusts have neuroradiologists, but they could save 9,000 lives lost to strokes by being able to advance new techniques. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to look at the clinical outcomes that health professionals could bring?

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend is right: it is crucial that we do that. A whole range of issues are beginning to affect staffing. For example, there is a £9 billion maintenance backlog in the NHS. Patients are being treated in hospitals that are not, in certain situations, fit for purpose and, importantly, staff have to work in those environments. In many cases, radiology equipment is not up to date, so staff and patients are either working or being treated in an environment in which the conditions and the equipment are not good. That goes to the heart of the staffing crisis as well.

[Peter Dowd]

There are lots of suggestions about how the Government could get to grips with the situation. Community Pharmacy England has plans to “resolve the funding squeeze”, which seems pretty straightforward, to

“tackle regulatory and other burdens”

that are affecting staffing, to

“help pharmacies to expand their role in primary care”

and to

“commission a Pharmacy First service”.

All those things go to the heart of enabling staff to feel wanted and that they are working in an environment where they are treated properly.

Of course, we then get people leaving in droves because of pay. I looked at some of the figures in relation to the pay restraint that we have had for the past few years: since the Government came to power in 2010, for all intents and purposes there has been either no pay increase or an increase of 1% here and 2% there.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for making such an excellent speech. Will he comment on the fact that at the University of East Anglia medical school we saw a fifth of new nurses, or training nurses, drop out of the course after the Government cut the nursing bursary? With the low pay, crisis of staffing and pressure that is going on, we expect those nurses to work in the NHS as they are training and rack up debt at the same time. If we are going to get the numbers back up, we must surely reintroduce the bursary.

Peter Dowd: Yes, we must. When these professionals come into the NHS and work their socks off, for all the hours that God sends, they do not even get a decent pay rise. They have had to pay to do the job, then they pay to do the job again because we are not giving them enough money. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The amount of funding the NHS gets falls well short of our international competitors in terms of revenue and current and capital expenditure. We spend about £3,055 per person on health; in our competitor countries, which are similar economies with similarly sized populations—such as France and Germany—the figure is £3,600. That difference, of the best part of £600 per person, is absolutely significant. We are falling further behind as the years go by.

The Government say, “Well, this year we have accepted the independent NHS pay review body’s recommendation.” I suspect that this is the first time in many years that they have accepted, championed and blown the bugle for it. Let us look at the detail and analyse it. The terms of reference include

“the need to recruit, retain and motivate suitably able and qualified staff”.

That is not happening, is it? That is nowhere to be seen. They also mention

“regional/local variations in labour markets and their effects on the recruitment and retention of staff”.

That is not working either, is it?

The terms of reference mention:

“The funds available to the Health Departments, as set out in the Government’s Departmental Expenditure Limits”.

In effect, the Government tell the pay review body what it can do, because of the amount the Department has, and then, when the body agrees with what the Government say, they say it has been an independent assessment. It is not as simple as that.

Here is another one: “the Government’s inflation target” is a factor. We all know where that is—whose fault is that? It is not the Government’s fault; it is the Bank of England’s fault.

The terms of reference mention:

“The principle of equal pay for work of equal value in the NHS”—

which was referred to earlier and is not happening. They talk about:

“The overall strategy that the NHS should place patients at the heart of all it does”—

but it is far from putting them at the heart of the service. In conclusion, staff need a pay rise and better working conditions; the only way they will get that is with a Labour Government in two years’ time.

3.23 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for securing this incredibly important debate.

As we have heard in previous contributions, we are proud of our NHS—and rightly so—but it is clear that our NHS is in crisis. Understaffing piles pressure on the existing workforce, tipping them to breaking point. The national NHS vacancy rate sits at 9.7%—that is one in 17 vacancies unfulfilled for doctors and one in 10 for nurses. The pandemic was an unprecedented strain that created an employment backlog, but staff shortages were critical well before covid. These are not just statistics: vacancies are all too often the difference between life and death. The autumn statement pledged £3.3 billion to the NHS, which is of course welcome, but funding and wages are still below 2010 levels in real terms, with sky-rocketing inflation further exacerbating an already dire financial situation. We know that it takes years to recruit and train healthcare professionals.

I have been contacted by many constituents who are facing unacceptable waiting times for GP and dentistry appointments. As we have heard in the debate, this problem extends across the whole NHS, whether it be in respect of pharmacies, cancer or ambulance wait times. When we see delays with GPs and dentistry, that sometimes leads to further pressure on other NHS services that could have been prevented had problems been identified earlier.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) outlined some of the issues with dentistry, which were reflected in the constituency-wide survey that I did in Barnsley East, in response to which many of my constituents said they really struggled to get a dentist appointment. That is concerning when we consider that Barnsley has the fourth highest rate of tooth decay in the country. In Yorkshire and the Humber as a whole, 98% of dental practices cannot take new patients.

One constituent contacted me just last night about their very concerning and upsetting experience in hospital. They have been waiting almost a year for a neurology

appointment after an initial injury in March 2021. They are in constant, excruciating pain due to a herniated disk and now have sustained a secondary injury. They are unable to work so have lost their job. Because of the current cost of living crisis, they are having to choose between heating and eating, as many across the country are. This constituent is unable to enjoy the things they once used to and is experiencing great distress and financial difficulty. They are unable to walk for more than 15 minutes at a time and cannot sit for sustained periods. They feel they have nowhere to turn, with no sign of an appointment any time soon, to find a solution to this pain. This is obviously a heart-breaking situation and one that people should not have to endure due to pressure and staff shortages.

There is not much more that NHS staff can do to give every patient the time they deserve. GPs are frequently seeing three times the safe number of patients, often taking up to 90 appointments a day. Some are reported as having taken 200 appointments a day. This results in warning signs for conditions such as dementia being missed. In South Yorkshire specifically, sickness absence is at 7.1%. NHS staff are becoming exhausted and getting sick themselves. How can they be expected to carry on in such pressurised working environments and meet the high standards that we are used to?

Almost 10,000 doctors left the NHS last year, with many citing conditions as their reason for leaving. Some 20,000 more are expected to leave in the next year. The NHS urgently needs more Government investment and not empty words. After 12 years of a Conservative Government, our NHS needs a Labour one. As has been outlined today, Labour's fully costed plan would double the number of university medicine places available per year, provide 10,000 more nursing and midwifery clinical places each year, provide 5,000 more health visitors a year and double the number of district nurses qualifying each year.

In closing, I put on record my thanks to NHS staff. My mum worked in the NHS for 40 years as a midwife and a nurse. I know how hard she worked and I know, from talking to NHS professionals across Barnsley, how hard they work. I know that we all thank them for their service. The reality is that the NHS and this country simply cannot afford this Conservative Government any longer.

3.28 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is nice to see you in the chair this afternoon, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on securing and leading this vital debate on NHS staffing levels. I also thank all Members who have made valuable contributions. I place on the record my thanks and admiration, and that of my party, for all those who work in our NHS in Scotland and in all social care settings.

We live in unprecedented times. We have endured the worst pandemic in living memory; we have witnessed the worst Prime Minister and Chancellor in living memory; we have an energy and cost of living crisis thanks to the invasion of Ukraine by the egomaniac Vladimir Putin and persistent public spending cuts that have crippled our economy; and we have the small matter, which very few dare to mention in this place, of the most horrific act of self-harm in living memory—Brexit. We in this

place can dance around any fact we like, but the real reason for the staff shortages and real pressures in our NHS is Brexit. Because of all those combined factors, our greatest asset, the national health service, is under the greatest strain in its 74-year history across all the nations of the United Kingdom.

Consistently poor and, frankly, dumb economic choices undertaken by the Government have led to unprecedented inflation, limiting the Scottish Government's ability to act in the areas in which they are required to do so due to the significant cuts to the Scottish budget. The previous Prime Minister's catastrophic mini-Budget wiped £1.7 billion from the Scottish Government's forthcoming budget in a matter of just a few days, dwarfing any increase announced recently by the newest Chancellor's autumn statement. Scotland has been left with an additional £200 million shortfall and Scottish health spending power has been reduced by £650 million. Is that what we have to be thankful for? It is most certainly not our Union dividend or our Brexit bonus.

Together with the Welsh Health Minister, the Scottish Health Secretary Humza Yousaf recently wrote to the UK Government calling for the Chancellor to announce additional funding for this year in the NHS budget so that health boards and the devolved Governments can afford to pay the wages that our NHS staff so rightly deserve. Covid costs continue to eat into funding, despite the UK Government stopping covid funding altogether. The UK Government are pulling their usual stunt of giving with one hand while taking away with the other. Unless the Government take urgent action to immediately increase their budgetary spend, the NHS as we know will be in extreme peril.

A hard Tory Brexit—and one backed and endorsed by the Labour party, as the people of Scotland are fully aware—means that Scotland has endured the greatest depopulation of any of these island nations. As a result, we have a shortage in available workforce, as reported on page 3 of today's *Financial Times* so illuminatingly. Scotland needs people to come in and bring their skills with them. We need a migration system that works for all of us and is fit for purpose. There is no other option if we are to fill the national labour shortages in our NHS and social care settings, as well as in other sectors that are in dire need of an eligible workforce—hospitality, transport, agriculture, fishing and many more. Again, Brexit is causing problems throughout every sector. The SNP's position is that immigration powers must be devolved to Scotland and the Scottish Parliament. If the UK Government do not want to solve the problems effectively, if indeed at all, it is time to get out of the way and allow us to do so.

The Royal College of General Practitioners has found that more than 40% of GP trainees are international graduates. Forty-nine per cent. of that number have reported issues with the visa process and 17% are considering leaving the United Kingdom altogether and, as a result, taking their much-required skills elsewhere. That is talent that we should be nurturing and harnessing, but we are instead pushing it away and rejecting it. The UK Government have consistently hamstrung the NHS with their privatisation and red tape agendas, and now an immigration mess is adding to the chaos. Now we have different NHSs across the nations of the UK competing internally with one another to attract and

[Steven Bonnar]

retain staff in our healthcare settings. It is one sorry mess, and the architects of Brexit must shoulder the responsibility.

GP numbers were touched upon earlier, and there have been concerns about GP numbers in Scotland, as well as elsewhere across the United Kingdom. It is worth noting that Scotland has a record number of general practitioners working across our nation, with more GPs per head of population in Scotland than across the rest of the UK's nations. The Scottish Government are committed to further increasing the number of GPs practising in Scotland by 800 by the end of 2027, investing £170 million each year for that purpose. We are making good progress on that commitment, with Scotland's GP headcount increasing by 277 to 5,195 between 2017 and 2021.

The Scottish Government continue to look for ways to encourage staff into working for our world-renowned NHS service and will continue to work co-operatively with the UK Government wherever possible to encourage sufficient inbound migration to plug the labour shortages and support the full staffing of our national health service. Last week, the Chancellor announced that more than 600,000 people on universal credit will be asked to have a meeting with a work coach so that they can get the support they need to increase their hours or their earnings. Instead of sanctioning the poorest people in our communities and attacking workers' rights by restricting trade unions, the UK Government must get real and focus on creating a fair and tailored immigration system that works for the people of Scotland and, indeed, the rest of the United Kingdom. However, it cannot be any clearer—other than to those who choose not to see—that the ramifications of Brexit are now beginning to bite in the very areas we knew they would, and we see nothing at all from this Government to suggest anything other than that the best future for Scotland's NHS and for Scotland as a whole is one in which the representatives of the Scottish people directly decide on how best to safeguard all that we hold dear. That only comes with our country's independence.

As I have a few wee minutes left, I will say to any hon. Members who represent English constituencies that the groundbreaking Pharmacy First service is excellent. It is working so well in Scotland, and I am glad that it will be rolled out across the rest of the UK. In Scotland, anybody under the age of 26 is now eligible for free NHS dental treatment. We have free annual eye tests for everybody in Scotland, and biannual tests for those over 65, free prescriptions for all, and free hormone replacement therapy and sanitary products. We are not getting it all right, but there is an ambition to get better, and we need the support of the UK Government to do so.

3.36 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for securing this important debate, and praise all the Members who have spoken this afternoon for their brilliant contributions.

The NHS is a cornerstone of communities up and down our country. It is the biggest employer in Europe and one of the biggest in the world, supporting the

livelihoods of millions of British families. A publicly funded healthcare service that is free at the point of need is a lifeline for so many, and the people of this country are overwhelmingly proud of it. The pride and respect we have for the NHS means that it will always have people to stand up and defend it when things are going wrong.

However, the reality is that patients are finding it impossible to get a GP appointment due to chronic shortages of doctors, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton). Stroke and heart attack victims are waiting an hour for an ambulance, and over 400,000 patients have been waiting more than a year for an operation. We have gone from an NHS that treated people well and on time to not just a winter crisis, but a year-round crisis, and an NHS that is understaffed and unable to deliver timely care.

The NHS is facing the greatest workforce crisis in its history. Right now, there are 132,000 vacancies across the NHS, and 165,000 in social care. We are short of 40,000 nurses, and we are losing midwives faster than we can recruit them. We are short of 12,000 hospital doctors, yet this summer, medical school places were cut by 30%, turning away thousands of straight-A students from training to become doctors when we need them more than ever. As we have heard again and again this afternoon, the consistent failure to train and retain the nurses and doctors our NHS needs has left staff overworked, overstretched and struggling to cope.

Peter Dowd: The Royal College of Physicians produced a short, medium and long-term plan for the NHS, specifically in relation to staffing. I was shocked to read that the measures to increase satisfaction and retention of current staff—getting the basics right—included access to hot food and drink, and rest facilities, at all hours of the day. The Royal College of Physicians putting that into a document shows how poor the situation is. Would my hon. Friend agree that the Government have to listen to that?

Feryal Clark: I wholehearted agree with my hon. Friend. With nurses already doing an average of £2,000 a year in overtime to make up shortages, the Government cannot rely on good will to get us through this crisis. They cannot afford to play politics and refuse to get around the negotiating table to avoid strike action.

It would be far too simplistic to suggest that pay is the sole cause of this crisis, as we have heard in this debate. Members who have spoken with NHS staff in their communities will know that the problems run far deeper than that. In this debate we have heard how staff are demoralised, burnt out and undervalued, and are working in poor conditions. Staff members are working harder than ever, but are unable to deliver the level of service they want for patients.

When I speak to NHS staff in my constituency of Enfield North, their passion and dedication is in no doubt whatsoever. One of the clear themes that came through in a local healthcare survey run over the summer was an appreciation in our community for the efforts of NHS staff. On a recent visit to Chase Farm urgent care centre, I saw at first hand the pride that staff had for the work they did, and their desire to deliver the best for

patients, despite chronic shortages of staff and the most trying of circumstances. They are going above and beyond the call of duty.

We cannot keep relying on the good will of staff. We need to see their attitude matched by action from the Government. Staff need to know that they will not be hung out to dry and that help is there for them. What reassurance can the Minister give to staff, at places such as Chase Farm, that their cries for help will be heard? If the Minister believes that what we heard from the Chancellor is sufficient, then he is very much mistaken. I am pleased that, after long calls from the Back Benchers, the Chancellor has dragged his party into agreeing to an independent assessment of our NHS workforce needs, but does the Minister really expect that assessment to say that the NHS has the people it needs to deliver a safe standard of care for patients?

Talking will not cut it for NHS staff. We need a plan of action. I was pleased to hear from my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), who set out Labour's plan so well. Labour's plan will deliver the biggest expansion of medical school places in history, doubling the number to give the NHS the doctors it needs to get patients seen on time. It will also include an extra 10,000 nursing and midwifery places, helping to close the gap caused by the loss of 800 midwives in the NHS since the last election. Labour would double the number of district nurses qualifying each year and train 5,000 more health visitors. That would be funded by abolishing non-dom status, a move that brings in double the £1.6 billion investment that our NHS workforce needs. The Chancellor has described our plan as something that

"I very much hope the government adopts on the basis that smart governments always nick the best ideas of their opponents." Given that statement, I look forward the Minister bringing the plan forward as the Government's own, sooner rather than later.

We know that getting more staff into the system will not, on its own, solve the problem. Our NHS has brilliant staff working in it already, and we must do more to give them the confidence to stay. The Government are simply not doing enough, and unless we improve retention, extra recruitment will not deliver the numbers we need. As we have heard, staff are leaving faster than we are recruiting. The scale of the crisis means that we cannot simply wait things out and hope it blows over. We need a plan and some action from the Government now. I look forward to the Minister telling us how they will deliver that.

3.45 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for raising this important issue. I join her in thanking all NHS staff for everything they do for us. The workforce are the beating heart of everything our NHS does and stands for. I hugely value the work of everyone who works in health and care, from consultants to care workers, nurses to neurosurgeons, and porters to physios. I thank all hon. Members from across the House who have taken part in this important debate. In the time available to me, I will try to respond to as many of the themes raised as possible—I have been frantically scribbling throughout the contributions.

I have only been in post for a handful of weeks, and in that time I have seen the very best and the future of our NHS with cutting-edge technologies and innovation. For example, it was only earlier this week when I saw genuinely world-leading world genome sequencing. Innovation and technological advancement is only as good as the highly trained and qualified clinicians who operate it or, importantly, who interpret the data. Health is a human business. I know this from my own family's experience of the NHS, and I am sure hon. Members know that too. Only caring NHS staff can provide the patient-centred and compassionate care that we all hope and expect when we interact with our NHS. That is why I am personally passionate about supporting our health and care staff, particularly when we are in challenging times. Last week, the Chancellor announced an additional £3.3 billion a year in the autumn statement to assist in this endeavour.

I turn first to workforce pressures, which were raised by the hon. Members for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton)—I am particularly grateful to her for sharing her 25 years of nursing experience. I am acutely aware that the workforce remain under sustained pressure. Staff worked tirelessly through the pandemic and they have my huge thanks and gratitude for doing so.

I know that every day hundreds of thousands of NHS staff provide high-quality care under considerable challenges. As well as the pressures we see every winter, in the summer, which is usually—I am told in the NHS you cannot use the Q-word, which stands for quiet—less busy, we had covid waves where we would not ordinarily. There is also the recovery of elective care and the 7 million people on waiting lists, including the 400,000 who have been waiting over a year, as the hon. Member for Wirral West rightly pointed out. There is the rising number of covid and flu cases—I take this opportunity to make a public health announcement encouraging people to check their eligibility and get their covid and flu jabs if they have not already done so.

Of course, it is vital that we support the workforce, not just now but for the future. The NHS workforce have grown since last year, with an extra 3,700 doctors and 9,100 nurses, but I understand that—this point was made eloquently and articulately by hon. Members—demand is growing significantly, too.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): In the light of workforce planning, somebody seems to have taken their eye off the ball. We have doctors who decide they want to be locums and get three times the shift rate. We have nurses who leave the NHS and sign up with the agency, costing three times more. When will we grasp the nettle of workforce planning and deal with it?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman is right that that is happening and I will come on to that matter in more detail. I would be happy to meet him, because it is an issue that I know needs gripping not just at the national level but by local integrated care boards too.

As hon. Members have pointed out, training the doctors, nurses and allied health professionals of the future takes time. We have to plan for the next decade now, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said. Despite the challenges, we have a growing NHS

[Will Quince]

workforce. We have record numbers of staff working in our NHS. There are record numbers of doctors and nurses. The NHS now has over 1.2 million full-time equivalent staff. In the last year alone, there were over 15,800 more professionally qualified clinical staff in trusts, and 129,800 more hospital and community health service staff than in 2019. Nursing numbers are 29,000 higher than in 2019, which means that we are on track to meet the 50,000 extra nurses manifesto commitment.

However, as the hon. Member for Wirral West pointed out, we face challenges. There are over 132,000 vacancies, including, as she rightly said, 40,000 nursing and midwifery vacancies, and vacancies for around 10,000 doctors. As the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) rightly pointed out, that means an over-reliance on bank and agency staff. They have their place, but they come at a significant cost, of which we have to be mindful.

We have a long-term workforce plan, which is an NHS England-commissioned project that will set out what workforce we need across the next five, 10 and 15 years. As the Chancellor said in the autumn statement, it will be independently verified. It will look at recruitment, retention and productivity. It will look at where the challenges and the gaps are. As the hon. Member for York Central, who is no longer in her place, rightly asked, what do we need the NHS to look like? Do we need specialists? Do we need more generalists? Do we need a mixture of skills, where people are specialists but also retain generalist skills so that they can do other work? The plan is for the project to report back by the end of this year—very soon—and that independent verification process will then take place. Integrated care boards will need to do the same, or a similar, piece of work at local level.

I am also aware that there are specific challenges. The hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale rightly raised mental health services. An extra £2.3 billion is going in, and our plan is to recruit an extra 27,000 staff, but it is a challenge, which is why we have the advanced bursary in that area. We have increased staff in the area by an extra 5.4%. I know that is not enough, and I know the challenges on local mental health services, so we have to do more.

There is a similar challenge in rural and coastal communities, which the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale has raised with me many a time. We have to look to expand the apprenticeship route and blended learning programmes so that people do not have to travel to big towns and cities to undertake their training. That work is being done, and there is an extra £55 million for additional placement capacity.

Investment in training is also important. We funded an extra 1,500 medical school places—a 25% increase—last year and this year. That was an investment in five new medical schools. The £5,000 non-repayable grant for nursing, midwifery and allied health professionals has been in place since 2020. There is also additional funding for certain courses, and for things such as support for childcare, dual accommodation, and costs and travel.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister comment on what the Royal College of Psychiatrists has said about staffing shortages?

Will Quince: Mental health does not fall specifically within my brief—it falls within that of the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield)—but I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman on that point.

Let me turn to staff wellbeing, which is an important point that the hon. Member for Wirral West rightly laboured. It is not just about pay; it is about many other issues. Recruitment is important, as the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) pointed out, but retention is equally important. We have to ensure that we keep the highly qualified, highly experienced people we have in our NHS. I am determined to ensure that staff are supported and that the NHS works to ensure that staff feel valued, not just by us at the national level, but locally.

The NHS people plan and the people promise set out a comprehensive range of actions that we are taking, such as expanding flexible working. That is important. For example, if somebody does not feel that they can do a full shift but they can work two or three hours, we should be saying, “Yes, of course we want you to work in our NHS and give us what you can.” Flexible working is important, as are improving leadership and ensuring that there is high-quality line management. People often say, “We leave the line manager; we do not leave the organisation.” We must support staff wellbeing and mental health. We also have the NHS retention programme, and we are growing occupational health and wellbeing.

I am conscious that time is short, but I want to turn to the issue of pay, which was mentioned by many hon. Members. I cannot touch on pharmacies today, but that is a hugely important issue and I would be happy to meet the hon. Member for Coventry North West to discuss it. I completely understand that pay is a hugely important factor in looking after staff, and we hugely value the hard work and dedication of NHS staff. I deeply regret that some union members have voted for industrial action, but I understand that these are challenging times for many, largely as a result of global economic pressures, and we are working hard to support NHS workers.

As hon. Members have rightly pointed out, we accepted the recommendations of the independent NHS pay review body in full. That means a pay rise of at least £1,400, or the equivalent of 4% to 5%, for most nurses, which is broadly in line with the private sector. It is important to point out that that is on top of a 3% award last year, when wider public sector pay was frozen, and the Government’s cost of living support with energy.

Through the programme of current work and long-term planning, we are building the robust and resilient workforce that our NHS needs for the future. We are working to ensure that we have the right people with the right skills in the right places, and to ensure that they are well supported and well looked after, so that they can look after those who need our great NHS services and keep delivering the world-class standard of care that people need now and in the future.

3.56 pm

Margaret Greenwood: This has been such an important debate, and I thank every Member who contributed to it. My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) spoke of the dejected and run-down

state of mind of many NHS staff. My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) spoke powerfully about how racism affects black and ethnic minority staff and how they are under-represented at senior management level—an issue that needs desperate attention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) spoke about her experience as a nurse for 25 years and the disastrous impact that staffing shortages have on her colleagues. We also had contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and for Bootle (Peter Dowd), and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I thank them all for their contributions.

We have heard powerful testimonies about the impact of the NHS staffing crisis on both staff and patients. We need the Government to come forward with a credible plan to show how they will address the crisis with a fair pay rise for NHS staff, and an urgent plan to deliver the colleagues that those staff so desperately need working alongside them. We also need the Government to call a halt to their privatisation agenda and to reinstate the service as a publicly owned, universal and comprehensive national health service that is free to all when they need it and paid for through direct taxation.

The NHS is one of this country's proudest achievements, but it is clearly in crisis. NHS workers should not be pushed into industrial action through Government negligence. They deserve our support, and they deserve a pay rise.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered NHS staffing levels.

3.58 pm

Sitting suspended.

Domestic Abuse and Public Life

4 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered domestic abuse and public life.

I am delighted to have secured this debate ahead of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women this Friday. Domestic abuse can affect people from all social classes and in all forms of employment, including public life. That is why I am working with MPs from all parties to call for a duty of care to be placed on employers and political parties to ensure that survivors of domestic abuse are not exposed to further harassment. There must be recognition that post-separation control and harassment is a form of domestic abuse itself and can occur long after a relationship or marriage has ended, with different tactics of abuse being used.

I would like to draw attention to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on domestic violence and abuse, which I am honoured to chair, in examining several key issues and policy areas where change is needed to support survivors. I am particularly pleased to see the hon. Member for Burton (Kate Kniveton) here today. I pay tribute to her for her bravery and courage in speaking out about her experiences, and I thank her for the support and solidarity she has shown me.

Kate Kniveton (Burton) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate, which means so much to us both. Does she agree that those of us in public life who have a platform and feel able to should help to eradicate the stigma and shame that many victims of domestic abuse feel by speaking out and raising awareness of the fact that domestic abuse can happen to anybody? By raising awareness, we can encourage those who do not have a platform to speak out and to speak without shame, so that perpetrators of this awful crime, which is so often committed behind closed doors, can no longer be so sure that their crime will go unnoticed.

Apsana Begum: I completely agree with the hon. Member; she is absolutely correct. It is so important to be able to give others the hope and courage to come forward. Those of us in public life, I am sure, feel a duty to encourage others to come forward, and feel quite lucky to be in a position to do so.

I want to make it clear that I do not view myself as a victim as such, nor am I seeking to play the “victim card”. In fact, I would argue that such accusations reflect not my weakness, but the weakness of those who make them. The truth is that it is extremely difficult for survivors to come forward. The stigma and the structural and systemic bias is always against us. The use of the courts and the law to threaten and silence us, never mind the trauma of the abuse itself, all too often seems insurmountable.

When I put myself forward to represent my local area, it was with hope for the future. Perhaps stupidly, I thought I could move on. Little did I know then that, a few years later, I would be in court facing a possible jail sentence and, just this June, I would have to present myself to A&E and subsequently be signed off sick. Just as I manage to survive one onslaught, another is coming up ahead—it goes on and on. The wall of institutional gaslighting is chilling.

[Apsana Begum]

I have a choice: to submit, to be crushed and then to be swept under the carpet as an unsightly problem, or to speak out. But I know this is not just about me. My experiences have shown that, despite steps forward, including the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, there is still insufficient understanding and awareness. I am very conscious of how survivors struggle against a system that fails them. Today is for them, and I am moved to see campaigners and local women watching this debate.

When I was studying at university, I lived at home, helping care for my father through an extended period of dementia up to his death. I got to know an older man, who had already been married twice, and ended up marrying him and moving in with him. As the relationship progressed, it became more and more volatile and abusive. By the end, I was sleeping in the living room with the sofa pushed up against the door so that he could not get in. I had to wait until he had an appointment in another city before I could plan my escape.

It is commonly assumed that a woman should just leave and her problems will be over, but that is far from the reality for so many. At its core, post-separation abuse is about power: attempting to control and punish in almost any way possible, whether through physical means such as violence, intimidation, threats or stalking, or via remote monitoring, emotional abuse and manipulation. I raised my ex-husband's behaviour, including the abuse, stalking, harassment and intimidation, with the police on several occasions. Police records regarding him include his being issued with a warning for harassment.

Gradually, I began to rebuild my life, which involved becoming engaged in politics locally, but he continued to make things difficult, including by behaving threateningly and aggressively towards me in public. As soon as I started to indicate that I was going to put myself forward to become Labour's parliamentary candidate in the general election, it all intensified even further, because of course I was just meant to stay in my lane and be little Apsana Begum. He told people that he was angry that I had not asked his permission to stand for selection.

Smears and rumours were spread about me, and there were threats that he would expose me for who I "really was" in front of the community. I was aware that he had pictures of me without my hijab on; if someone threatens to use something like that against someone now in this country, it is considered an act of intimate image abuse. He was privy to private information: my medical records, my previous mental ill health, and the fact that I had a secret abortion during the early stages of our relationship, which at the time was unknown to anyone, including my family.

This honour-based harassment was about maliciously destroying me in front of elder members of my community. He called campaign team members, making threats that he had been contacted by the media, who had offered to buy stories about me, and telling people that they should make me stand down or else. It all got even worse after I was elected to Parliament. How dare I not listen? How dare I not do what I was told? There were calls to local people who supported me when he was drunk, saying that evidence was being collected for the council to take me to court. He was a sitting councillor at that time.

As such, just two years after being elected as the UK's first hijab-wearing MP, I had to endure an eight-day trial, which brutally forced me to talk about painful private experiences. While I was found innocent of all charges, I fear that the ordeal of that trial, which cost the council significantly more than the amount I was accused of defrauding it of in the first place, will haunt me for the rest of my life.

The practice of abusers misusing the court system to maintain power and control over their former or current partners, a method sometimes called vexatious or abusive litigation—in other words, stalking by way of the court—is recognised by experts as a form of domestic abuse. I want to explain why I believe this case to have been vexatious and why I want something like it never to happen again.

I first heard of the complaint that led to the case through threats, rumours and the press a month before even being informed officially that an investigation was under way. An article published in *The Sun* newspaper during the general election even showed a picture of the building where I lived, which was extremely frightening given the risk that this placed me under. I have since found out that the complaint that led to the investigation was made by my ex-husband's brother-in-law, Syed Nahid Uddin, to coincide with the deadline for final nomination papers to be submitted.

During the trial, my barrister, Helen Law, brought out, through cross-examination of the fraud investigator from the council's fraud team, a series of conflicts of interest, including that my ex-husband was a member of the council's audit committee in the same year of the fraud investigation. That committee had governance and oversight over the work of the fraud team. The matter of domestic abuse was actually used against me by the prosecution. It was argued that the abuse was a motive for the alleged crimes. Raj Chada, the criminal defence partner at Hodge Jones & Allen who represented me, argues:

"Prosecutors and investigators need to better understand and consider how victims of coercive control and domestic abuse behave and how they are treated by the criminal justice system."

At around the same time that I was going through the ordeal of the court case, a group of people who were close to my ex-husband took over the local Labour party, and despite my being vindicated the smears have continued and accountability has been thwarted. Motions in support of me were passed by the local party, but only after they were blocked from even being discussed for months on end. Meanwhile, people who supported me or spoke up for me continued to be targeted, including some who were contacted by my ex-husband himself. I believe that to be an example of what is often called indirect abuse, whereby threats are made against third parties or they are intimidated or manipulated into engaging in behaviours desired by the perpetrator. Those behaviours involve the use of proxies to humiliate and discipline, and ultimately to maintain power and control.

Most recently, while I was unwell, a trigger process—a process that my party uses to decide whether a sitting MP will remain the candidate at future elections—was conducted. Again, I am aware of my ex-husband's involvement: there are even witnesses who saw him among the reportedly 50 men who stood outside one meeting in a way that many felt was intimidating. In my mind, it is no coincidence that the process was overseen

by his associates. To explain and provide further evidence of that conflict of interest, I will give some examples. The procedure secretary who oversees the whole trigger process is close to my ex-husband, and has publicly credited him as one of the reasons why they were elected to their role. One of the local executive observers for two out of the four in-person meetings, who was secretary for another meeting, is a close friend of my ex-husband and has been pictured with him only recently on social media. Another has been the subject of a complaint after he sent an email to all branch members containing a copy of a letter repeating allegations of which I had been cleared and revealing my home address, putting me at risk.

Another close associate of my ex-husband was the secretary overseeing one of the meetings. He had previously been warned by the police to stop harassing me after I reported him for continuing to contact me; I had to ask him to stop unwanted contact after he posted a letter to me through my family member's letterbox. The chair of one of the meetings was a long-time associate of my ex-husband, who had even approached me in 2018 and asked me to meet him, advocating on my ex-husband's behalf that I should go back into a relationship with him. I also understand that comments were made in meetings about the fact that I speak too much about domestic abuse, and that the process was about teaching me a lesson. Even the delegated national executive observer has connections to my ex-husband.

Of course, it is up to individuals who they wish to associate with. My point is that such people cannot also oversee a process about my future, because not only can domestic abuse be indirect, but it can involve the use of public status and societal power. That is before one even considers that the trigger process was conducted while I was unwell, and that a litany of complaints have been submitted containing allegations of harassment and misogyny, particularly from local women. I am still in a situation where I have to risk-assess local events, and am unable to participate if the risk is too high or cannot be mitigated. I believe that there must be a duty to ensure inclusive, democratic and safe environments and it deeply saddens me that I continue to be placed in a position where, for safeguarding reasons, I am being prevented from participating fully in public life.

As I have said, my experiences are far from unique. I have been contacted by women and survivors from all over the country and I feel a tremendous duty towards them. Domestic abuse has been hidden for far too long, despite it having serious health consequences for individuals and our society, but after everything I have been through and whatever the future holds, I am determined to raise awareness and campaign for a society where individuals experiencing domestic abuse feel confident that they will be believed, listened to, and given the support they need. Ultimately, I want the UK to be a country where survivors are not thwarted by ongoing harassment and abuse.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4.30 pm.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I take stock of and am impressed by the courage of all

victims of domestic abuse, from whichever walk of life, who have to deal with misogynistic physically and mentally abusive behaviour. It is a pleasure to address this Chamber. I would like to thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) for requesting the debate and for speaking so openly and candidly about her terrible experiences. I thank everyone else for attending, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Kate Kniveton) for her contribution.

We can all agree that domestic abuse has no place in our society. It is a terrible crime with devastating consequences. It is high volume, affecting 2.3 million adults a year. It is also high harm and high cost. The social and economic costs of domestic abuse are estimated to be in the region of £77 billion. Our Parliament and our institutions must play a role in addressing it and making sure victims are supported and feel supported. No one should have to experience the abuse we have heard about today and the Government are determined to tackle violence against women and girls, including domestic abuse.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned domestic abuse and I want to come on to that. Domestic abuse is the all-too-common form of violence against women and girls, but it is emotional abuse too. In July last year, as a Government we published our tackling violence against women and girls strategy to help ensure that women and girls are safe everywhere—at home, online, at work and on the streets. In March, we published our tackling domestic abuse plan, our blueprint for delivering the change that is so badly needed. Our violence against women and girls strategy and domestic abuse plan aim to transform the whole of society's response to those crimes to prevent abuse, support victims, pursue perpetrators and strengthen the systems in place to respond. The tackling domestic abuse plan committed more than £230 million of investment to that purpose, including £140 million for supporting claims and more than £81 million for tackling issues regarding perpetrators.

We are making good progress with implementing our commitments in the tackling violence against women and girls strategy and the tackling domestic abuse plan. To give a few examples, we have launched a highly successful communications campaign called "Enough", which has reached millions and surpassed all expectations. It is a wonderful initiative that focuses on the range of safe ways in which bystanders can intervene and help women who are suffering such incidents. The fourth round of funding from the safer streets fund was announced in July, an initiative that has been taken out across the whole nation. Through the fund, the sum of £125 million has been awarded. We have also supported the appointment of the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for violence against women and girls to drive better policing of such crimes. We have doubled our funding for the national domestic abuse helpline and increased our funding for other helplines too. We have also increased funding to support children—it is worth noting that this not only affects individuals who are adults, but children too. Millions of pounds a year will support seven bespoke projects related to children, who are also victims. I know the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse does not like the term "victim", but we need to protect and empower those who are victims in equal measure.

[Miss Sarah Dines]

We introduced the landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which the hon. Lady has mentioned. It includes the first general purpose definition of domestic abuse, emphasising that it is not just physical, but can be emotional, controlling or coercive and can relate to economic abuse. Through the Act, we have also introduced new offences and it was salient that not everybody in the Chamber voted for that. The Act created the new offences of threatening to disclose intimate images and non-fatal strangulation and also prohibited perpetrators from cross-examining their victims in family courts and civil proceedings. That is huge progress and was probably unthinkable when I first qualified at the Bar in 1988. We have made progress, but there is more to do.

I was particularly moved by the hon. Lady's explanations about abuse extending post-separation. That is something that the Government know much about and there is academic research on the subject. That is why the work on the landmark Domestic Abuse Act is so important, delivering new support and protection for victims as well as the new offences I have mentioned. The Act also recognised for the first time—something that the Government are very proud of—that controlling or coercive behaviour does not stop at the point of separation.

I am grateful for the private information that has been publicly shared in this Chamber. I was very moved by what has been said. There is a huge amount I wish to say, but I have been trying to focus particularly on what has been said. I want to mention the courage of the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse in calling this debate and coming back into public life, as well as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Burton. It takes a huge amount of effort to come back to work and carry on after this sort of incident.

Nobody should have to bear stigma or shame. We are a modern country and it is not good enough. I will do my best in my ministerial position to support victims. I am pleased to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Burton that she feels strong enough to speak out and encourage those who do not have a platform to speak for themselves. The debate is part of that journey, and I commend all involved for being here today.

I note the general concerns on so-called honour-based harassment, vexatious issues of litigation and the use of proxies or third parties to spread maliciousness and lies. All those issues need to and will be considered carefully. It is a tricky balance in looking at what can be considered as clear, provable abuse and what happens behind the scenes. That is part of the reason why the police have an onus through their new training to look at the whole picture. They must and should look at the whole picture, not just one incident that happened at a certain time on a certain date. They need to look at the overall picture and history.

The Government are funding extra work on risk assessments for cases with a history of domestic violence and abuse. I urge the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse to seek police advice where necessary. If there is a physical risk to her being that prevents her from being not only an ordinary citizen, but the extraordinary citizen that she is as an elected MP, she must seek advice. Wherever I can, I will seek to help her.

Let me move on to standards in public life and the working culture in Parliament and other organisations, which are issues close to all our hearts. The crime survey for England and Wales, which reaches thousands of people annually, shows that women and people from minoritised groups are disproportionately affected by domestic abuse. We have a responsibility to tackle these issues and ensure that we listen to and support victims.

The Government work very closely with organisations that seek to improve employers' responses to domestic abuse, including the employers' initiative on domestic abuse and the employers domestic abuse covenant. It is vital that employers, including police forces and other frontline services, as well as Parliament, can effectively respond to domestic abuse. Developing robust policies to ensure that all employees feel supported and empowered in their workplace is critical to that.

In Parliament, the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme was set up in 2018 to improve the working culture of Parliament. The House of Commons also agreed to establish an independent expert panel to determine sanctions against MPs should a case of bullying or harassment be upheld. Although these steps are welcome, there is clearly more to do in all walks of life. The Government have made it clear that there is no place for bullying, harassment or sexual harassment in Parliament—or elsewhere. We will continue to work on a cross-party basis to ensure that everyone working in Parliament is treated with dignity and respect.

On internal political issues, I do not think it would be right for me, as an observer, to make any major value judgments, save to say that I have heard about a very worrying picture. I hope and wish that transparency will come forward and we will hear the true facts. If things are as dreadful as the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse has said, I wish her the best of luck in clarifying her future. It does not matter what area a victim works in, where they live, or what sex, colour or religion they are—domestic abuse is not acceptable. The Government will work wherever we can to try to stamp out domestic abuse and uphold proper standards in this place.

Question put and agreed to.

4.24 pm

Sitting suspended.

Supporting UK Artists and Culture

4.30 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of supporting UK artists and culture.

It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. The UK is an international cultural powerhouse. Our arts and creative industries have the capacity to regenerate communities and to drive global exports, and to put a boot up the backside of our stagnant economy, but it feels like we have not always supported or nurtured our world-leading creative talent as we should as a country, or understood our arts and culture as the golden economic goose that it is.

Just look at what the sector currently contributes to the UK. Our creative industries employ 2.1 million people and contribute £116 billion to our economy each year. UK exports were worth more than £37.9 billion in 2019—12% of total UK service exports. The creative industries also help shape the UK's image around the world. British musicians, artists, writers and actors command a global audience, while many of our cultural beacons draw millions of visitors into the UK. As soft power goes, there is simply nothing like it. That is why we must never underestimate the potential of our arts and culture, and the vital role of its people, the creators and performers, who underpin this success story.

Globally, some modern emerging economies really get this. South Korea's creative industries have taken the world by storm, with K-pop and drama, from "Parasite" to "Squid Game", at the forefront. What makes that even more remarkable is the fact that the language is barely spoken outside of Korea. Just as South Korea implemented industrial policy for the export of electronics, cars and chemicals, it applied a policy approach to develop its creative industries. In less than a generation, South Korea transformed from being effectively a third-world country to an industrial powerhouse and the world's seventh largest cultural player, with its creative cultural sector making nearly \$11 billion in exports and supporting 700,000 jobs last year.

Meanwhile, dedicated music or creative industry export hubs have been springing up in countries across Europe, funded by Governments and industry keen to ride the wave of this growing market. At a time when worldwide recorded music trade revenues are set to double by 2030, British music exports could increase to more than £1 billion by the end of the decade. That will require a supportive policy environment that maximises UK export potential against a backdrop of intensifying global competition.

Funds such as the music export growth scheme will be crucial, but we also need a hardcore strategy to underpin this. What do the Government have in mind? Could they look again at the idea of dedicated British music or creative industry export hubs to drive this forward, because at the moment the support is simply not good enough? A creative industries trade and investment board website has had only three posts in the past 12 months, and the Creative Industries Council has just one upcoming event over the next 12 months advertised on its website.

By its very definition, this is an innovative and agile sector. That was demonstrated during the pandemic in how some organisations swiftly pivoted to using digital to ensure that the band played on. One example is the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, which responded to the first national lockdown in 2020 with an exclusive series of live concerts streamed online. During the first six months of this series, it increased its audience by almost 30%, with 65,000 views by audiences around the world. We have digital innovation to thank for that.

Digital has completely transformed how people consume culture and driven appetites for cultural works. A recent survey showed that 81% of people think that accessing cultural works through a digital device is important to their daily lives. Despite this shift, there has not been a corresponding benefit to artists, many of whom operate as creative freelancers. That is why more than three quarters of survey respondents support the Government considering new ideas and initiatives to sustain the UK's creative industries.

The public understand and value our culture and our creative talent. They also see the huge difference that culture can make in their local neighbourhoods. Funding the arts delivers investment in left-behind communities and aids economic regeneration. There are no two ways about it. There is evidence right across the country. For example, in Margate, thanks to the legacy of local artists such as Tracey Emin, the Turner Contemporary opened in 2011 and has contributed more than £70 million to the local economy in the last decade. This week, I will be really pleased to attend the reopening of Gosport Gallery, part of Hampshire Cultural Trust. That was a massive regeneration project funded by high street heritage action zones. We thank the Government so much for that investment, because it is breathing new life into our beleaguered high streets.

There is no doubt that the Government recognise how arts and culture can be a significant driver of levelling up, and I welcome the recognition that redistributing some of the national Arts Council spend away from London to the regions is a way to achieve that. However, I am going to urge a little bit of caution on the Minister: it needs to be done in a way that supports investments in projects and organisations that can genuinely start a snowball of growth, not as a tick-box exercise and certainly not as tokenism.

Much as I would love to see English National Opera relocate to Gosport, under the current proposals the out-of-London version will receive significantly less funding than its current form, so it will have to stop funding projects like ENO Breathe, its game-changing response to long covid. That has been operating in 85 NHS trusts across the country, including my own. The current proposal risks the work that the ENO has been doing with schools across the country, and it could stop it being able to offer free or discounted tickets to a younger audience. That work means that one in seven of its attendees is now under the age of 35. In fact, it risks the organisation becoming the opposite of what we want and the opposite of what it is—it risks it becoming an elite organisation for those who can afford to pay £300 for a ticket, albeit one outside London.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I am very pleased to rise under your chairship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline

[*Dame Margaret Hodge*]

Dinenage) on having secured this debate. I should declare an interest, in that I chair Theatre Royal Stratford East, in London. I wanted to come in on the issue of English National Opera and the cut that will mean the closure of an absolutely unique facility in London. Does the hon. Lady agree that one cannot level up by destroying excellence? We have to embrace excellence and ensure that it is enjoyed throughout the country.

Will the hon. Lady also join me in congratulating the ENO on partnering with Theatre Royal Stratford East to put on a production of “Noye’s Fludde” by Britten? We engaged a lot of young children from east London, who need as much levelling up as those elsewhere in the country, and we managed to secure out of that an Olivier award.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: The right hon. Lady makes an excellent point. The ENO has been groundbreaking in the way it has appealed to younger audiences and reached out in partnerships. It has done TikTok videos seen by hundreds of thousands of people. It has even done beatboxing in a car park. It has done virtually more than anybody to bring opera, which is often regarded as a bit of an elitist art form, to the masses and to a newer, younger audience. It will be a disaster if such organisations—not just the ENO—lose that unique identifying factor in the move. I have nothing against driving investment outside London, but we have to do that in a careful way and not as some form of crazy tokenism. I therefore ask the Minister to look again at giving the ENO more time and more resources to deliver the appropriate change and to continue its excellent work.

We also have to face the fact that we cannot rely exclusively on public funds to support the creative industries; we need new ideas. Funding and income streams across the UK remain a massively pressing issue—the Minister will know this—with most creators and performers earning less than the minimum wage. A strong copyright framework is a key element. Freelance creators and performers rely on royalties from the use of their copyright-protected works in order to earn a living, but they are currently not receiving fair remuneration when their works are copied, stored and shared digitally. I therefore ask the Minister to look at the Smart fund proposal to address that. It is suggested that in the UK it could raise up to £300 million a year for creators, performers and communities. Similar schemes already operate in 45 other countries, generating almost £1 billion a year globally. They do so by diverting a small percentage of the sales of electronic devices, which copy, store and share creative content, into a fund that is paid out to creators and local community projects, with a focus on digital creativity and skills.

The benefit of such a scheme is huge for creators. In France alone, it raised over £250 million in 2021, supporting artists and funding almost 12,000 cultural activities a year. Most importantly, there is simply no evidence that when tariffs change, device prices change, too. The potential for something similar for communities in this country is huge, and I ask the Minister to look at it. It is also supported by the Design and Artists Copyright Society, the British Equity Collecting Society, Directors UK, and the Authors’ Licensing and Collecting Society, which represent over 330,000 creative workers between them.

Will the Minister meet representatives of the creative organisations that support the Smart fund to discuss this issue?

Our artists and creatives have a unique power. They can lift spirits and boost wellbeing, and they can regenerate communities and promote levelling up. They can drive economic prosperity and turbocharge global trade. No other sector can do all those things. No other sector has such a strong track record of delivering for the UK economy or so much future potential, so I urge the Minister to leave no stone unturned in efforts to harness that potential.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespersons at no later than 5.7 pm, and the guideline limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for His Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Dame Caroline will then have three minutes to sum up at the end.

Six Members are seeking to contribute. To get everybody in, we will have to have a time limit of four minutes. I gently remind right hon. and hon. Members that if you wish to speak in Westminster Hall, you are meant to write to Mr Speaker in advance, but I will endeavour to get everybody in. The first speaker will be the House’s most distinguished musician, Kevin Brennan.

4.42 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I was not expecting that and I am not sure that it is true, either, but I am a member of the Musicians’ Union, as you know. I declare that as an interest, as well as my membership of PRS for Music, Phonographic Performance Ltd and various other bodies. I occasionally receive some payment for that work.

I thank the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) for securing the debate. The Minister should listen to what she said, because she knows what she is talking about. She was a distinguished Minister until she was cast aside brutally, as happens in this place as soon as somebody shows some gumption and knowledge of a subject. Her expertise should therefore be of great value to the Minister, who should listen to everything she said. I agree with pretty much everything she said—I hope she is not too worried by that.

Obviously, I am the Member of Parliament for Cardiff West, and the creative industries and arts are extremely important to the city of Cardiff’s culture, but also to its economy. I want to briefly mention five things in the four minutes that I have. First, the “Let the Music Move” report was issued earlier this year by the all-party parliamentary group on music. I sent a copy to the Secretary of State and asked for her response, and I also asked my office to contact her private office. I have still not received a response, but I hope that she has read the report and that the Minister will read it—I am happy to give him a copy. It sets out how we can try to solve the issue of musicians touring in Europe, accepting that we have gone through Brexit, which is not the issue here. This is not about immigration, but about ensuring that our great creative industries can flourish. I hope that the Minister will read the report, and that the Secretary of State has read it and will write back to me soon with her response to my letter. If it has not been received, her office can let my office know and I will send another copy.

Secondly, I wish to address the recent announcement made by Arts Council England, which was also mentioned by the hon. Member for Gosport. It is perfectly legitimate to seek to spread our cultural wealth around the country; in fact, it is an essential part of any effective arts policy. However, to announce, as Arts Council England did, savage and sudden cuts to some of our great cultural organisations is no way to do business. I hope that the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, of which I am a member, will talk to Arts Council England about that in the very near future. I also remind Members that Welsh National Opera will be affected by these cuts because it receives Arts Council England funding for touring around England, meaning that it is not necessary to have another opera company in places such as Liverpool, Birmingham, Oxford and Southampton, which is closer to the hon. Lady's constituency.

Thirdly, I want to address the Government's recent decision on artificial intelligence. It was taken against all advice and, as far as I know, nobody asked them to do it. It is partly the Minister's responsibility, but it also sits with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Tech companies already pay artists a pittance, but the Government are proposing that they should now be given unrestricted access to the work of musicians, artists and others to use AI to produce facsimiles of their work and not pay them a single penny. It is a shocking decision, coming out of a report by the Intellectual Property Office, and I hope that the Minister will tell us that the Government will look at it again, because it has caused absolute outrage among those who are already trying to scrape a living out of intellectual property from their artistic and creative endeavours.

I have two quick last points. We also need to fix streaming and get artists paid better. Finally, UK Music is issuing its diversity report this evening. I hope that the Minister will also take note of that and read it.

4.46 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinéage) on securing this debate. I agree with and endorse absolutely everything that she has said. I will concentrate on English National Opera. I declare my interest as chair of the APPG on opera.

Make no mistake: what the Arts Council is proposing is not the relocation of English National Opera, but the killing of English National Opera. It is, effectively, closure. It has acted in a peremptory manner, with no consultation and a most questionable evidence base. The extraordinary suggestion by its director of music, of all people, that there was no growth in grand opera in the UK has been flatly contradicted by people such as David Buchler, a former member of the ENO board, who set out why that is a false analysis in *Opera Now* magazine. The chairman of the Arts Council praised the leadership of the ENO—under its chair, Dr Harry Brünjes, and its chief executive officer, Stuart Murphy, who is here today—as being outstanding. But their reward is to be kicked in the proverbial, because, at the end of the day, it was proposed on very short notice, with no consultation whatever, that the company should be required, having lost a third of its income, to move to

an unspecified venue. Manchester was floated as a venue, but nobody in Manchester was consulted. The venue in Manchester was never looked at. In fact, it is not suitable for unamplified performance, so opera simply cannot be done there. The Mayor of Manchester knew nothing of it; Opera North, which already operates in Manchester, knew nothing of it. It is wholly unfeasible.

It is impossible to relocate an opera company over three years. When Birmingham Royal Ballet was moved from London to Birmingham, it took five years. It is impossible to anything in less. In any event, moving English National Opera out of London would mean the chorus, orchestra and technicians being made redundant. Three hundred skilled, world-admired people would lose their jobs in London, with no hope of replacing them in the provinces.

I hope that the Minister will take this away. It is all very well to say that the Arts Council operates at arm's length—yes, but when it goes rogue and gets something seriously wrong, the Minister is entitled to use his influence, as best he can, to make it change its mind. Can we have this done outside the context of a one-off peremptory decision, based on no evidence? Let us have a proper strategic review of opera provision. Let us ensure that the ENO receives a realistic level of funding over the next four years or so, to keep the company in being, because if it folds it will be lost forever.

The ENO is more than willing to look at doing more work outside of London. That ought to be part of the discussion, but it cannot do it on this basis. We ought to be looking at this on the basis that it keeps a London base. It is able, and has already taken steps, to rent out the London Coliseum to other companies to produce musicals—“My Fair Lady” was a great success—and to bring in income to cross-subsidise. It is doing the right thing and has never had a more commercial or business-like approach. No doubt it could negotiate with the Arts Council ways to take more productions out into the provinces, which would be a good thing, but that can be done only if the company is strong to start with. This proposal would destroy the strong company and the provinces would not be gainers, so I hope very much that the Arts Council will think again. There is a sensible way forward, but it requires the ENO and the Arts Council to sit down and talk.

The English National Opera has been the ground seed for British operatic talent: virtually every notable leading British opera singer and musician has started or had part of their early career at the ENO. International stars still return to the ENO. It is the only company that operates in English, it is accessible in the vernacular and its audiences are more ethnically diverse than those of any other company. Some 50% of the audience are first-timers and one in seven is under 35.

If we want to grow opera, the English National Opera is the company doing that. To kill it off, which is what the Arts Council is doing, is an utter dereliction and complete contradiction of what the Arts Council asserts it is trying to do. Even within the arm's length rules, it is time for the Government to put pressure on the Arts Council to reflect and think again.

4.51 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I apologise for not giving you advance notice that I wanted to speak, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon.

[Ms Harriet Harman]

Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) for securing the debate and I join my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) in paying warm tribute to the work she did as arts Minister. She is on the Back Benches at the moment, but I am sure she will be on the Front Benches again. In the meantime, she is doing very good work, so I pay warm tribute to her.

With everybody incredibly anxious about what is going to happen to energy bills, with food prices soaring and with the NHS and public services struggling, it might seem an odd time to be raising the issue of funding for the arts, but it is absolutely right for us to do so. As well as helping drive our economy, as the hon. Member for Gosport said, our culture and arts are central to how we define ourselves individually and as a nation.

We must not allow public policy to drive the cultural impoverishment of this country, but unless the Government step in to stop that or the Arts Council can be persuaded to think again, that is exactly what is going to happen with the closure of the English National Opera at the Coliseum. We cannot stand by while the ENO, which is artistically excellent, economically vital and culturally important, is closed and, with that, see the end of the social engagement and widening access that is central to the ENO's mission.

The Arts Council has removed all funding from the ENO at the Coliseum, meaning that, as the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) rightly said, 300 skilled artists, dedicated professionals and other employees will be thrown out of work. The Arts Council spin was that the ENO was to be relocated as part of levelling up. *The Guardian* said that the ENO "is to relocate outside London"

and the BBC said:

"English National Opera to leave London as arts funding gets levelled up".

The briefing was that the ENO was going to Manchester—not only was that a bolt out of the blue to the ENO, but it was the first time Manchester had heard of it, and it was not what they wanted. The Arts Council is closing the ENO with a tremendous cultural loss and nothing to show for it up north.

What the Arts Council proposes to do is completely wrong, but the way it has gone about it—with no consultation and, frankly, misleading spin—is shameful. It should think again. Yes, times have changed and times are hard, but difficult decisions should be made carefully, not with a wrecking ball. I am backing the ENO's call for three things: a strategic review of opera as a whole; that the Arts Council should agree realistic funds for the ENO for a period of four years; and that the Arts Council should agree a period of five years to consult on a new model, based on the ENO retaining its Coliseum base but increasing still further its fundraising and work outside London.

As has been said, the ENO has effective leadership; I pay tribute to that and it is also fully acknowledged by the Arts Council. It has a dedicated company of employees who deserve better than to be thrown out of work in April next year. The ENO means a great deal to many, as emails from my constituents can attest. I thank all those who have contacted me and assure them that the ENO will have my full support.

Surely Sir Nicholas Serota does not want his legacy to be the closure of the ENO; if he goes ahead with the closure, that will be the only thing everybody will remember about him and his tenure at the Arts Council. The decision to close the ENO is wrong, and the best thing to do with a wrong decision is to change it. The Government have been quite active on that front in the past, with U-turns here and there—this would be one U-turn that would be universally welcomed. I welcome the Minister to his role and I hope to hear in public, or even in private—whatever is necessary—that he will step in, and that the ENO will not be closed.

4.55 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) for securing this important and timely debate.

I am incredibly proud of the vibrant arts and culture offer of my constituency, from the west end's theatreland to iconic live music venues such as Ronnie Scott's, the 100 Club or Heaven, as well as the Barbican centre, the Royal Albert Hall, the Royal Opera House and the London Coliseum. According to the Office for National Statistics, 8% of arts and culture businesses are based in the Cities of London and Westminster—over 2,500 businesses. In the time I have, I will pay particular attention to how we can support arts and culture through an incredibly difficult time.

When we look at how we can best support the future of the sector, forward planning is key, especially post covid. Its importance has been made clear to me throughout covid and more recently, during the ongoing decisions on the future of the English National Opera, which is based in my constituency. It is good to see the ENO's chief executive, Stuart Murphy, in the Public Gallery.

Dame Margaret Hodge: Does the hon. Lady agree that there is a real misunderstanding about how much money is invested in the arts in London? That investment is brilliant, but there is a misunderstanding about it. First, it includes national institutions such as the British Museum, which should not be included. Secondly, the audience for London entertainment comes from the south-east, and the south-east gets hardly any money from Arts Council England. If one were to incorporate the two, one would see that the funding per capita in London is equivalent to the funding per capita in the rest of the country.

Nickie Aiken: I thank the right hon. Member for her very salient point. Given the funding, or lack of it, from Arts Council England, the future of the ENO is dependent on two factors. The key driver is to move out from its current location at the London Coliseum. The debate on cuts to funding could be a standalone issue, so I will not stray into its complexities right now. I will take that up when I discuss ENO funding with Arts Council England this week.

Right now, what I hear is that one of the major issues the ENO faces is not necessarily a prospective move, but the tightening of timescales and a lack of due consultation. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) mentioned the lack of consultation

with the ENO. In fact, Arts Council England expects 20 weeks, between now and April, to be enough for the ENO to start making decisions about its future.

Although I appreciate that a funding decision must be made, moving the ENO in its entirety is a big misstep. As we have heard, it will take five years at least. Is Manchester the right place? I personally want consideration to be given to the model used by the Royal Shakespeare Company, which has a base in the Barbican centre and in Stratford-upon-Avon. That works well: it keeps the London offer, but goes out into the provinces. I cannot see why Arts Council England should not work with the ENO to discuss that type of move, which would keep the London Coliseum alive while perhaps not moving the ENO up north. We have a brilliant Opera North organisation. What about the west country? What about Bristol, Exeter or Plymouth? Those areas need levelling up. Why cannot Arts Council England work with Stuart Murphy and his team to give proper consideration to that?

Kevin Brennan: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I have to protect the time for the two remaining speakers who are seeking to contribute. The hon. Gentleman can seek an intervention if he wishes, but doing so would reduce the time for the last two speakers.

Kevin Brennan: I was just pointing out that the Welsh National Opera does Bristol.

Nickie Aiken: I thank the hon. Gentleman for pointing that out—maybe Exeter and Plymouth, then.

Let me move on to another very important point: the economic drivers that culture brings to areas such as central London. Central London is the powerhouse of the economy and that is because of the hospitality, leisure and culture sectors working together. For every £1 spent in theatres, £5 is spent in the wider local economy. That is tens of thousands—if not hundreds of thousands—of jobs. That is not just in London, but across every major city that has theatres. We have the pantomime season coming up now—oh yes we have! I used to go to the pantomime in Cardiff with my grandparents every year; the local economy really does depend on families going to the theatre and having a meal before or afterwards.

In the very short time I have left, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport for securing this debate but also for her outstanding work as a Minister. During covid, the arts and culture sector was on its knees; there were worries. I had calls every day during lockdown from really major players in the culture sector who were worried about whether they would ever open their doors again. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for working with me to secure the £1.5 billion culture recovery fund. I know that she played a huge part in that; it made a difference not just to my arts and culture sector in central London, but across the country.

I end by saying that we face a very difficult economic time, but we cannot lose sight of the contribution that artists, the arts and culture play in our country—from not just an economic, but a health and wellbeing point of view. I hope we can keep securing all that and that we can save the ENO.

5.2 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Apologies that I did not notify your office that I wanted to speak, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to follow my constituency neighbour and to praise the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) for raising this important and timely debate.

I declare an interest: I was a member of Arts Council England for the London region for seven years. While on the Arts Council, one of the things I tried to push was ensuring that it funded some of the smaller organisations, which were not well known but had a massive reach in bringing great art and culture to a really diverse audience. There is still a notion that arts, culture, opera and music are for a select few, but we know that the power of arts and culture—in transforming lives, in bringing new people into a new role, in tapping into the creativity that a number of our young people have—is so important.

I am proud to represent Vauxhall, which is home to some of the most iconic arts organisations in the world, such as the Old Vic, the Young Vic, the Southbank Centre, the National Theatre, the BFI, Waterloo East theatre, Omnibus theatre and Rambert, to name just a few. They are fantastic institutions that reach not only across London, but right across the country. That is the power of publicly funded arts organisations.

The Arts Council England announcement last week shows a real-terms cut to London's cultural sector. That is a shame because—on the back of the covid pandemic and so many other issues—we know the power of arts and culture in helping to address the issues we face, such as the challenges of mental health.

The joy of seeing a group of young people from Lambeth stand on stage at the Southbank Centre at the annual Lambeth Sounds music festival—a number of parents never having seen their children perform, a number never having even been to the Southbank Centre: that is the power of arts and culture, but it can happen only if we continue to fund these great organisations. They do fantastic work in reaching out.

I have just one question for the Minister on this: does he agree that we cannot level up the rest of the country by levelling down London's renowned cultural sector? I hope that he will work with Arts Council England in terms of looking at this decision and supporting great organisations, including the ENO, to ensure we continue to have great arts for everybody instead of feeling that arts and culture is for people who can afford it.

We have the power to succeed in making sure this works and to create new, emerging talent. We have the BFI London film festival in my constituency, which taps into some of the new talent that we did not even know existed. We could lose all that if we do not nurture it. I want to see art being taught in our schools. Schools funding has been cut in this sector; we do not speak about that enough. Why is it that only parents who can afford extra music lessons get their children to play instruments? It is so important. Not every child will be academic, but a number of them can be creative if we support those subjects. I want the Minister to talk about that.

I finish with some of the other costs and measures that the arts sector is facing. Energy costs have increased. A number of buildings are crumbling. There is no

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

discussion about capital; that is another area that is often left out. I hope that the Minister will come back to those issues. I reiterate the need to ensure that we support London's heartbeat: its cultural sector.

5.5 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) for bringing forward this important debate. Believe it or not, creative arts run through the very veins of Cornwall, just as much as fishing, farming or mining. In fact, in a village called Playing Place between Truro and Falmouth, plays were performed in the round in medieval times. And if anyone was in Truro on 27 June 1970, they might have gone to see the first gig of a small, little-known band named Queen. We now have a global reputation in visual arts and theatre; a university dedicated to the creative industries; a growing appeal for international TV and film productions, musicians and music producers; and world-class digital connectivity.

Cornwall's creative achievements are the result of planning and hard work in recent times by a lot of local people and organisations, who have worked together to help Cornwall's creative rural economy grow. As such, Cornwall has more creative jobs than any other rural part of the United Kingdom. A brilliant local example is Falmouth University, which used to be Falmouth College of Arts. It is now leading the charge to change the way in which creative education is delivered. It is central to Falmouth's role as a major creative innovation hub, and its teaching facilities are second to none.

We must also continue to support our local and home-grown assets in Cornwall, such as the Hall for Cornwall in Truro. This social enterprise and charity brings great shows to Cornwall, bolsters schools and communities with local projects, and supports artists and practitioners who create original work. The herculean efforts, led by Julien Boast, were completed throughout covid and under very difficult circumstances. I am pleased that Arts Council England has recently announced an over £1 million investment between 2023 and 2026 for the Hall for Cornwall Trust, which will bring growth and creative opportunities for local people. That investment will help to solidify Truro's status as a cultural hub for the arts and the creative sector. I urge the Government to continue to support the venue in the years to come.

There is more. There is also the Old Bakery Studios in Truro, which offers more than 50 studios and workspaces to artists of all types. RouteNote, a company in Newham, offers a way for musicians around the world to stream their tracks on Spotify and the like. Cornwall County Council is also supporting the arts and creative industries with its creative manifesto, which is an ambitious plan for the next few years to maintain and enhance Cornwall's position in the sector. The plan includes ambitions to boost culture in communities, promote collaborative working, get more people into creative jobs and ensure the sustainability of this important industry.

The Government are right to have supported the creative industries throughout the pandemic, providing nearly £2 billion for the sector. I am also grateful to them for announcing a £50 million investment package for creative businesses across the UK earlier this year.

However, we must recognise the challenges that the industry continues to face, some of which we have heard about this afternoon.

Despite everything that we have going for us in Cornwall, our social and economic context remains a challenge, and we are behind the majority of the UK on a lot of key economic measurements. A low-wage seasonal economy, a lack of affordable housing and a skills shortage among young people are holding the creative industries back. If we can tackle those challenges, celebrate our creatives and artists, and target investment into our region, Cornwall can continue to play a central role in helping the UK become a world leader in these sectors.

Let me be clear: creative arts are key to levelling up Cornwall. I look forward to continuing work with the Government to support this cause, and I would be delighted to welcome the Minister to Cornwall to see at first hand the exciting work that is going on.

5.9 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) on securing this debate. I was particularly interested in her references to Korea; I recently came back from Korea with other members of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. We have a great deal to learn from them. I reference the comments from the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) about Stratford and regeneration. Last night, we visited "Abba Voyage", which was specifically chosen to help regenerate. I would like to associate myself with the comments about the English National Opera, which many Members made. I am a great fan of the ENO and wish to see it thrive.

We all appreciate the vital role of culture and art in our lives. Art offers consolation, empowerment to communities, and culture benefits for participants and performers and helps people to realise their own value. We in Scotland cannot mitigate entirely the impacts of covid or the rise in costs but, as so much of culture is devolved, the Scottish Government have acted. We delivered an addition £125 million in funding for culture and heritage before covid, and a further £2.2 million directed at grassroots venues to make sure that once the worst of the pandemic had passed, we would still have stages to fill.

Scotland needs the borrowing powers that would allow us to meet critical issues with emergency funding when required. Instead, we have to rely on the UK Government. At a time when we need all the help practicable to secure an industry that has done so much with so little money, we instead have disastrous cuts to the budgets. We know the impacts: a 7.1% drop in disposable income over the next two years. This is a time when the cultural sector needs more audience numbers and more tickets sold.

The UK Government are hellbent on pursuing Brexit to the rock bottom, regardless of casualties. The hard Brexit has cut off revenue streams, making it harder for cultural actors from Scotland to travel to the EU to earn money from audiences there. Lord Frost rather casually said of his failure to secure a deal on touring artists, that it was a "shame". The man failed to deliver a specific deal on the issue. Twenty four out of 27 EU countries have agreed access for touring musicians, but they are not uniform. It is so much more difficult to tour—for some players, it has become impossible.

Brexit is an irredeemable failure. However, the specific damage to the cultural sector can be mitigated with effort at the negotiating table. We need the UK Government to accept their failings and the sharp need for Scotland's cultural sector to frictionless access to the EU, along with our friends south of the border. The Scottish Government are engaged constantly in a dialogue with stakeholders in the cultural sector to seek pathways through these crises. We have suggestions: a cut in VAT would help struggling venues; renegotiating with a homogeneous simple touring visa within the UK would enormously; and the devolution of borrowing powers to Holyrood could support those most in need.

A future without our vibrant arts and cultural sector is surely unthinkable. On the Scottish National party Benches here at Westminster and at Scottish Government level we will do all we can to shield Scotland and its cultural sector from many of the calamities imposed upon us by Brexit and the UK Government.

5.13 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I declare that I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on classical music. It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) for securing this debate, and all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed.

Our leading arts and culture organisations have been enriching our lives, enhancing our reputation on the world stage and contributing to our GDP for many years. Yet, having weathered the challenges from the covid pandemic and a decade of funding cuts to the arts, they now face a perfect storm of increased energy and operating costs, and a cost of living squeeze on audiences. Financial security has rarely been more important. Given the scale of the current pressures on arts organisations, I hope the Government will consider measures widely called for across the sector, such as the extension of the current higher rates of theatre tax relief and orchestra tax relief beyond next spring.

I want to speak mostly about the funding allocations for Arts Council England's investment programme 2023 to 2026. While some excellent organisations are being given national portfolio organisation status, overall the recent announcement showed poor planning, short-sightedness and too much political direction. First, the chaos in Government led to a last-minute delay in the funding announcement. Then, what actually emerged were proposals that imperilled the arts sector through cuts to institutions, which as we have heard, have their roots in the core of the sector.

Cuts have been imposed on theatres and opera companies, which contribute significantly to the arts talent pipeline and are vital to the health of our regional theatres through their touring. Glyndebourne production has had its funding halved, despite its production of "La bohème" filling out theatres in Norwich and Liverpool this month. Welsh National Opera is another touring company that has had its funding cut by a third, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). These organisations are being cut despite doing everything that was asked of them. English National Opera delivers education and outreach programmes that reach 165,000 people every year. It

has worked hard to increase access to opera from free tickets for under-21s to relaxed performances, and it has the most diverse full-time chorus in the country. Yet the ENO has been entirely cut from the national portfolio organisations programme and will receive nothing from next October if it does not move from London to Manchester, affecting the job security of 300 full-time employees and over 600 freelancers.

We have heard about the total lack of consultation around this suggested move. It is one of the clearest indicators of a top-down approach from Arts Council England and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. I have to say to the Minister that this seems to be more about political gimmickry around levelling up than a true rebalancing of power to regions outside of London. As we have heard, not one of the key organisations affected by the suggested ENO move to Manchester was consulted before the public announcement, including Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham, Manchester City Council, Opera North and the Factory.

The funding allocated for the move is just £17 million—a fraction of what would be needed for ENO to operate from Manchester. After splashing £120 million on the Unboxed festival, which only reached a quarter of its audience target, Ministers should think again about these cuts. Donmar Warehouse is another example of a world-class producing theatre that has lost all its NPO funding. It told me that

"this self-defeating decision will undo much of the work that...has been done over the past few years and prevent us from implementing our plans to further expand our footprint outside of London."

What we have seen is an attempt to address regional disparity by shifting some funding to the regions, but doing so out of a funding pot that has been shrinking since 2010, and 70% of the organisations being entirely cut from the programme are based outside London, including the Oldham Coliseum, the Britten Sinfonia and the Watermill theatre.

Levelling up should not be about pitting the arts against each other. Arbitrarily cutting and directing arts organisations without planning or consultation risks their very existence and makes it more difficult to improve regional parity in arts provision. Arts Council England has admitted that the unpopular choices made in this latest funding round are a direct result of instruction from Ministers. I urge the Minister to recognise in future the value of an independent Arts Council England setting its own agenda and being flexible to the needs of the organisations it serves.

It is clear from today's debate that we need a proper plan to fund ENO, rather than expecting it to undertake a move to another city and exist on a third of the funding. I support the calls made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for a strategic review of opera provision, the reinstatement of a realistic level of funding, and time to consult and conduct any feasibility assessment for moving out of London.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am glad to be here to discuss the Government's support for the arts and culture sector. I am grateful to my hon.

[*Stuart Andrew*]

Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) for securing the debate and I thank everyone for their contributions. My hon. Friend is a passionate supporter of arts and the creative industries, and I share everyone's view that her steadfast support for the cultural sector during the covid pandemic as the Arts Minister meant that she was instrumental in securing the unparalleled cultural recovery fund, the film and TV production restart scheme and covid reinsurance schemes, all delivered by DCMS over those two years.

Frankly, without my hon. Friend's instrumental work in securing and delivering that fund, this debate would be telling a different story—one of how to rebuild a decimated industry. Instead, our support for the sector has been unprecedented. Around 5,000 organisations were supported through the cultural recovery fund, alongside additional support through pan-economic measures, such as the self-employment income support scheme and the furlough scheme.

The 2021 Budget also increased tax reliefs for theatres, orchestras, museums and galleries until 2024. Those additional tax reliefs are worth almost a quarter of a billion pounds and are a fantastic boost for the cultural sector to keep producing the content for which we are world famous. Taken together, the interventions supported the cultural sector through the challenges of covid and steered it into recovery.

The Government's investment in culture is at the heart of our levelling up approach, with a strong belief that the enrichment that culture brings to people's lives needs to be more equitably spread.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stuart Andrew: Very quickly, because I have eight minutes to get through a lot.

James Morris: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. On the point about the ENO and levelling up, do we not need a better definition of what we mean by levelling up when it comes to opera? It is not just about where things are located, but about how young people learn about opera, how it is perceived in schools and so on. Do we not need a better definition of what we mean by levelling up—not just distributing money?

Stuart Andrew: I take on board my hon. Friend's points and will come on to some of them later on. The economic growth that creativity can catalyse should be seen in all our towns and cities, and the pride of place that culture and heritage can bring to communities should be felt across the entire country. That is why we asked Arts Council England to invest more in its levelling up for culture places. That is why we are investing across England through the cultural investment fund. That is why DCMS and its arms-length bodies have been supporting the assessment process of the levelling-up fund which, importantly, has culture and heritage as one of its three priority investment themes.

As hon. Members will know, central to all that support is our delivery partner Arts Council England. It has recently announced the outcome of its 2023 to 2026 investment programme, which will be investing £446 million

each year in arts and culture in England. That will support 990 organisations across the whole of England—more than ever before and in more places than ever before—with 276 organisations set to join the portfolio, 215 of which are outside London. That, for example, includes £500,000 for the Hampshire Cultural Trust on an annual basis. Its application was focused on expanding the organisation's work in three of Arts Council England's priority places, including the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport, along with Rushmoor and the New Forest. The trust described the decision as “a landmark day”.

Dame Margaret Hodge: Will the Minister give way?

Stuart Andrew: I am afraid I am running out of time. I have been asked a lot of questions, and I need to get through them all.

In short, I am unapologetic that the Arts Council is providing support to more organisations in more places than ever before for the following reasons. First, it is providing more opportunities for children and young people. There will be a 20% increase in organisations that are funded to deliver work for children and young people in the new portfolio and 79% of the new portfolio will deliver activity specifically for children and young people.

Secondly, it is supporting more libraries and museums than ever before. Funding for libraries will increase nearly three-fold and 223 accredited museums will receive a total investment of more than £113 million over three years, representing an increase of 21%.

Thirdly, we will see an increased investment in 78 previously underserved places, totalling £43 million each year and representing an increase of 95%. Places such as Blackburn, which never got a penny before, will now have four projects supported. That is something I certainly support.

I understand that some hon. Members may disagree with the decisions taken by the Arts Council in recent funding announcements. The individual decisions were taken by the Arts Council, which assessed an unprecedented number of applications. The decisions are therefore for the Arts Council to comment on. However, I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport will agree with me that, stepping back and looking at the whole picture, it is exciting to see a portfolio that gives people right across the country more opportunities to access culture on their doorstep. The new portfolio supports both new and more established organisations to develop and thrive.

I turn to the English National Opera. There were a record number of applications, and it was a competitive fund. I recognise that leaving the portfolio can be a difficult process for organisations, their employees and their audiences. While I cannot comment on the specifics of individual funding decisions that were taken independently by the Arts Council, ACE has proposed a package of support to the English National Opera. The Department is very keen that Arts Council England and the English National Opera work together on the possibilities for the future of the organisation. My noble friend Lord Parkinson, the Arts Minister, has been very keen to hear the views of Members in the debate today. I will ensure that he will be aware of the points raised.

A number of other specific points were raised. The Creative Industries Council has been a key partner in supporting the creative industries. It has provided a forum for us to engage directly with the industry on the challenges and opportunities they face, and we worked together to deliver the 2018 sector deal. It has been our partner in developing the creative industries sector vision, which will be published in the new year. I welcome the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport.

On creative exports, UK creative industries were identified in the Government's export strategy as a priority sector to contribute to the Government's target of £1 trillion of UK exports by 2035. The Government are not currently pursuing an export office, but continue to support creatives exporting to Europe and the world with a range of export support programmes, including the successful music export growth scheme and the international showcase funds. We will continue to work with the Department for International Trade on these important issues.

I am conscious of the time, so I will have to write to hon. Members about several issues. On the Smart fund, the Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), has already met with industry bodies to learn about the proposals. I will make her aware of the comments made in the debate today.

Finally, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) asked me to read the APPG report, which I am more than happy to do; again, I will raise the issue with the appropriate Minister.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport again for bringing this debate forward. I am grateful for the opportunity to listen to Member, and I will make my colleagues in the Department aware of the points raised strongly today. I am aware of the impact of the pandemic on the arts and culture workforce and how many left the sector as a result. The best way we can bring those people back and attract new people in is to help drive growth. Ultimately, we want to drive that growth across the entire country.

5.28 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part today. This has been a really great debate. I thank the Minister—apologies for the fact that he has had a bit of an ear-bashing. I welcome him to his role; I know that he will carry it out as he has all the others, with an enormous amount of dedication and ability.

The Minister kicked off by talking about the immense work that happened in DCMS over the pandemic. He is absolutely right—an enormous amount of blood, sweat, tears and money came out of the incredible team at DCMS over that period, and there are a number of cultural institutions that simply would not be around today had there not been that amount of work. I guess what I am saying today is that we must not lose that momentum. We must build on that.

Our arts and culture make us feel good and are good for our health and wellbeing, but they also define us—they are who we are as a nation. Even if we talk about the issue in cold hard pounds, shillings and pence, they are the cornerstone of our UK economy. As I said before, the sector makes up 12% of our service exports. The sector means business.

At the heart of the sector are the artists and creative talent who make it possible. It does not happen by magic; it happens when we support them, nurture them and encourage them. We cannot take our eye off the ball on that. Knowing that money is tight, I urge the Minister to look at some of the investment I spoke about today, such as the Smart fund—innovative ways of generating money to support our creatives—and to look again, if he can, at some of the decisions made by the Arts Council. Although I completely agree with the idea of devolving money to other parts of the UK, we do not do it by destroying cultural institutions that have already done so much to support our culture and arts.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 22 November 2022

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Official Development Assistance

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): As set out in the autumn statement 2022, reflecting the significant shock to the economy and the public finances, the independent Office for Budget Responsibility's forecasts show that the principles for a return to spending 0.7% of GNI on official development assistance, confirmed by Parliament in 2021, have not been met. Consequently, His Majesty's Government will continue to spend around 0.5% of GNI on ODA until the principles for a return are met.

Recognising the significant and unanticipated costs incurred to support the people of Ukraine and Afghanistan escape oppression and conflict and find refuge in the UK, the Government are providing additional resources of £1 billion in 2022-23 and £1.5 billion in 2023-24.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's latest estimate of its planned ODA spending for this financial year, 2022-23, is £7,584 million. The FCDO will also plan on the assumption of a similar FCDO ODA budget for next year, 2023-24, to aid financial and operational planning, although this remains indicative. This is in the context of the support we are providing to those fleeing the war in Ukraine and insecurity in Afghanistan.

We will need to decide on the distribution of planned ODA allocations over the remainder of the spending review. I want to update the House on how we will do this.

First, I have instructed officials to focus spend according to the priorities set out in the international development strategy, while maximising value for money and our flexibility to respond to new or emerging priority issues.

Secondly, we will meet the financial commitments we have made to multilateral organisations. They will remain essential partners in achieving our goals. We will work with them on the profile of these commitments to get the balance right with our bilateral programme spending.

Thirdly, we are now able to lift the pause on ODA spending and activity and will act swiftly to manage our bilateral programmes this financial year. We will approach this in a proportionate way, with experts on the ground in-country empowered to determine which programmes to continue, in line with our approach to prioritisation.

We are committed to being more transparent about our ODA spend. The FCDO can meet our development aims only when we work closely with our delivery partners, when we listen to and engage with people in developing countries, and when we explain to the British public how every penny spent helps improve lives around the world and is in our national interest.

In order to maximise the value for money of ODA across Government and deliver greater reliability to our partners, we will strengthen ODA governance arrangements, ensuring that the international development Minister and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury can more effectively scrutinise ODA spend.

The UK will remain a world leader in development, not just through the impact of our ODA spend, but through our business, trade, civil society, research and technology expertise. For example, new vaccines and nutrition-enhanced, drought-resistant crops have been developed by the best brains in UK science and universities collaborating globally. This is one of the many ways in which the UK is partnering with countries to take control of their own future.

[HCWS379]

TRANSPORT

Ship Safety: Draft Merchant Shipping (Fire Protection) Regulations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): The Merchant Shipping (Fire Protection) Regulations 2023 were today published as a draft, along with an accompanying draft explanatory memorandum. The draft regulations revoke and replace the Merchant Shipping (Fire Protection: Large Ships) Regulations 1998 (S.I. 1998/1012) ("the 1998 regulations"), the Merchant Shipping (Fire Protection) Regulations 2003 (S.I. 2003/2950) ("the 2003 regulations") and make other consequential amendments to implement the most up-to-date requirements of chapter II-2 in the annexe to the international convention for the safety of life at sea, 1974 ("the convention"), relating to safety measures for fire protection on ships.

The draft regulations are being published for 28 days. Following the conclusion of this period, and once any observations on the draft regulations have been taken into account, they will be laid for approval by each House of Parliament. This procedure is required under paragraph 14 of schedule 8 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 because these regulations revoke an instrument, the 1998 regulations, that was made under section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972. Statutory statements explaining the steps taken to publish the draft regulations and the reasons for the revocation of the provision made by section 2(2) are contained in the annexe to the draft explanatory memorandum.

The draft regulations implement requirements for fire protection on ships in chapter II-2 of the annexe to the convention, including previously unimplemented requirements to improve fire detection and suppression on cabin balconies for tanker ships to carry an oxygen measuring meter and portable gas detector and other measures.

The updated measures in chapter II-2 are in force internationally, but the measures must also be incorporated into our national legislation to enable them to be enforced effectively, most notably to discourage non-compliance by non-UK flagged ships in UK waters, which would be detrimental to the safety of shipping in UK coastal areas. The draft regulations will ensure that UK law includes increased safety standards for fire protection on both UK flagged ships and non-UK flagged ships within the scope of the convention operating in UK waters.

The draft regulations also include an ambulatory reference provision to ensure that future amendments to chapter II-2 referred to in the draft regulations will automatically become UK law when they enter into force internationally. As described in the accompanying draft explanatory memorandum, a ministerial statement will be provided to both Houses of Parliament ahead of

any amendment to chapter II-2 referenced in the draft regulations, prior to it coming into force in UK law by way of the ambulatory reference provision.

The draft regulations and the accompanying draft explanatory memorandum can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/regulations-for-fire-protection>

[HCWS378]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 22 November 2022

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Environment Agency: Enforcement Budget

The following is an extract from Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions on 17 November 2022.

5. **Simon Lightwood** (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of a reduction in the Environment Agency's budget on its enforcement work. [902207]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I feel a bit like a jack-in-the-box this morning, Mr Speaker.

Environment Agency enforcement is at a record high, and its funding is closely monitored to ensure that it can continue to hold polluters to account. Last year, record fines were handed to water companies, making it clear that polluters will pay. The EA's total budget this year is £1,650 million. I am always bad at reading out numbers

and putting them into words. That is nearly 20% of DEFRA's entire budget, including new ringfenced money for special enforcement activities, such as 4,000 more farm inspections and 5,000 more sewage treatment works inspections.

[Official Report, 17 November 2022, Vol. 722, c. 809.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow):

An error has been identified in my answer to the hon. Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood).

The correct response should have been:

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I feel a bit like a jack-in-the-box this morning, Mr Speaker.

Environment Agency enforcement is at a record high, and its funding is closely monitored to ensure that it can continue to hold polluters to account. Last year, record fines were handed to water companies, making it clear that polluters will pay. The EA's total budget this year is £1,650 million. I am always bad at reading out numbers and putting them into words. That is nearly 20% of DEFRA's entire budget, including new ringfenced money for special enforcement activities, such as 4,000 more farm inspections and **500** more sewage treatment works inspections.

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Tuesday 29 November 2022**

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