

Thursday
8 December 2022

Volume 724
No. 88



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 8 December 2022

House of Commons

Thursday 8 December 2022

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Winter Preparedness

1. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What cross-departmental steps he is taking to help ensure preparedness for winter. [902657]

9. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the operation of public services during the winter months. [902668]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Oliver Dowden): The Cabinet Office has well-established processes to support Departments and their sectors to ensure the effective delivery of key services over the winter. They are underpinned by comprehensive risk assessments and contingency plans for a wide range of risks, including industrial action and severe weather. The national resilience framework will be the first iteration of our new strategic approach. It will strengthen the systems, structures and capabilities that underpin the UK's resilience to all risks.

Afzal Khan: The UK's power supply is already stretched to breaking point, with the National Grid telling us that blackouts are now a very real possibility. Over the next few days, temperatures are expected to drop to well below freezing. A blackout in those circumstances could be catastrophic for the most vulnerable in our society. Will the Minister urgently explain to my vulnerable constituents what they should do to remain safe and warm in the event of a power blackout during freezing cold temperatures?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman raises two important points. First, in respect of the winter weather, the Cabinet Office is keeping a close eye on it. Indeed, I have been briefed on the situation. On the wider situation in relation to energy supply, I am working closely with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps). He and I have strong confidence about the resilience of the UK power networks and, excepting a very exceptional circumstance, we are confident that we will continue to supply throughout the winter.

Peter Aldous: As we approach the peak of winter planning, I would be most grateful if my right hon. Friend set out the role of the Cabinet Office in ensuring

that Government Departments are properly co-ordinated, in both their communications and their actions, with local resilience forums and local authorities.

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is the central role of the Cabinet Office. We continually watch for emerging risks, and support Departments and their sectors to develop contingency plans for a wide range of scenarios. My officials work closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to share intelligence on those risks with local authorities.

Mr Speaker: We now come to shadow Minister.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): During the winter, severe weather or any emergency, the British people rely on the Government to be more prepared and better ready to respond than they were for covid. The national resilience strategy was promised in last year's integrated review and then promised again for the autumn. Then we had the summer of ministerial chaos. Autumn is over, winter is definitely here, and the Minister has just promised a new approach on emergencies. Can he tell us when to expect this very important strategy?

Oliver Dowden: The short answer to the hon. Lady's question is imminently. I have cleared the framework and it is receiving cross-Government agreement. I hope to publish it very shortly. I would, however, like to reassure her that that is not the only thing we are doing. We have already completed three out of the seven initial deliverables. I will chair the first meeting of the UK resilience forum early in the new year.

Mr Speaker: We come to SNP spokesperson. Welcome.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Winter has finally arrived and, despite the Minister's confidence, the UK's energy resilience is about to be tested. Scotland is rich in energy, but far too many people are living in the grip of fuel poverty and will not be able to turn their heating on. Immediate devolution of policy would be fantastic, but failing that, can the Minister tell me what his Department is actually doing to ensure that families will not be without power this winter? What contingency plans are in place and what are they? What advice will the Government be issuing to people, should the worst happen?

Oliver Dowden: We continually test our plans and our resilience. As I set out in response to a previous question, barring a very exceptional circumstance, the Business Secretary and I have confidence in our power networks. The hon. Gentleman asks what the United Kingdom Government are doing. I gently say to him that it is because of the strength of our United Kingdom that we have been able to provide over £50 billion-worth of support for families up and down the country to keep their energy bills under control this winter. An independent Scotland simply would not have that kind of firepower.

National Infrastructure: Cost

2. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the cost of national infrastructure projects. [902658]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): The Infrastructure and Projects Authority supports projects to develop robust cost estimates and the capability to deliver effectively. The IPA published the “Transforming Infrastructure Performance” road map last year, which supports a step change in the construction sector to embrace modern methods of construction.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for that response. As well as getting value for money, with all our infrastructure projects can we make sure that all housing developments and new businesses get the infrastructure they need?

Jeremy Quin: Absolutely; it is critical for all our infrastructure projects that we have comprehensive support for the expansion of the economy and prosperity. By their nature, our major infrastructure projects support the whole of the United Kingdom, levelling up and our people, whether that is at a local level—to which my hon. Friend refers—or through our large-scale projects such as the Dreadnought programme, on the defence of the country, or the school rebuilding programme, which will inspire students for decades to come.

Veterans: Support

3. **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve support for veterans. [902661]

4. **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve support for veterans. [902662]

The Minister for Veterans’ Affairs (Johnny Mercer): The Government are committed to ensuring that our veterans and their families have the support that they need to thrive in civilian life. The Government have established the first UK Office for Veterans’ Affairs and the first Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, who attends Cabinet. As part of the role, the Minister will deliver the veterans strategy action plan, which sets out 60 cross-Government commitments that will make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran by 2028.

James Sunderland: The Minister will know that the all-party group on veterans is leading on a bespoke survey of the experiences of veterans when they deal with Veterans UK. Will the Minister commend that survey, alongside the OVA’s survey, and undertake to take our findings seriously? Does he agree that we must leave no stone unturned in all Government Departments to make sure that our veterans get the best possible support?

Johnny Mercer: Certainly, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and his campaigning, as well as the work of the APPG and the survey that it has put out on Veterans UK. I have been clear—my position has been unchanged over the years—that there are good people working at Veterans UK. That part of Government has been underinvested in by Governments of all colours over many years, and too many people have an experience that is not acceptable. We are working on that. A £44 million investment in digitising Veterans UK will see a significant improvement in its service, but this is an ongoing conversation. I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to make sure that we deliver the service that we all want for our veterans.

Ian Levy: Support for our veterans is not just appreciated, but absolutely vital for the physical and mental wellbeing of our ex-servicemen and women. We are well represented in Blyth Valley, with the Royal British Legion in Blyth and in Cramlington, but we also have the Forward Assist organisation in Dudley, which offers support for services and campaigns such as “Salute Her” and its “One Stop” café. I recently had the privilege to meet up with veteran Jack Hearn as he celebrated his 100th birthday. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing Jack a belated happy birthday and thanking those organisations for the great work that they do on a daily basis?

Johnny Mercer: Of course I wish Jack a happy birthday, and I pay tribute to “Salute Her” and the many people involved in third sector provision across the country, who work tirelessly to support our veterans. The Government are committed to building an ecosystem of veterans care that works with them to make sure that we all work together and realise our country’s responsibility to our veterans.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is welcome news that the Commonwealth veteran who was medically discharged from service and returned to Fiji can settle in the UK and access medical care. That is thanks to the new waiver on visa fees for non-UK service personnel, for which the Minister and I long campaigned. Does he agree that those who travel here to put on a uniform and serve our country deserve our support, and that we should do everything that we possibly can to assist them and their families when they complete their service?

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his tireless campaigning on this issue over many years—years before I did—to make sure that our foreign and Commonwealth service personnel are looked after properly. There was a change of policy as result of his campaigning, in terms of waiving visa fees, and he knows that my views will be unchanged whether I am in ministerial office or not. We have a duty to these individuals, and my aims and ambitions do not change. I am determined to keep working with him.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I met Help for Heroes, which has done great work to support veterans and to utilise LIBOR funding, which has now ended. What assessment has the Minister made of potential replacement funding streams to support veterans with the cost of specialist wheelchairs and mobility aids, and what internal discussions have there been about reinstating the veterans mobility fund?

Johnny Mercer: I am well aware that the veterans mobility fund is coming to an end—that project was LIBOR-funded and LIBOR funding has come to an end. We are seeking to replace that with a more sustainable, more evidence-based process that will make sure that we look after the specialist needs that some of our amputees will have. I am absolutely determined that they will see no reduction in service, but will, in fact, see a better service through the understanding of their needs as they progress 10 or 20 years beyond their injury. I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member and go through with him what we are looking to do.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Last month, the Minister said that the roll-out of veteran ID cards would be completed by next summer. The Government have said that issuing ID cards to veterans

“will help them access specialist support and services”

where needed, but only 3% of veterans have received an ID card since they were announced nearly four years ago. Can the Minister explain how the remaining 97% will receive an ID card in only a matter of months?

Johnny Mercer: Yes, of course—I am more than happy to explain that to the hon. Lady. The issue is that we have managed to issue veteran ID cards to those who are leaving, because we can easily verify their service. We have never before been able to easily verify the service of veterans in this country; that is why we are investing £44 million in Veterans UK. I am confident that we will achieve the digital success we need early next year, in the spring, and start issuing these cards next summer. I look forward to working with the hon. Lady to make sure we deliver on that.

Rachel Hopkins: I note that the Minister says he will “start” delivering rather than complete it, but I welcome his determination to get veteran ID cards finally rolled out. However, making bold statements will not divert from the fact that his Government have failed to deliver for our veterans and their families. Whether it is due to incompetence or to negligence, at the current rate it will take more than 100 years to issue all those veteran ID cards. How does the Minister expect our armed forces communities to believe that the Government will make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran by 2028 when this is the Government’s record?

Johnny Mercer: I am afraid that I just do not accept the premise of the hon. Lady’s question about this Government’s record on veterans. Clearly I came to this place because our veterans provision was not good enough; that has markedly changed since we started campaigning. Of course I accept that there are challenges—there are historical challenges around veteran ID cards—but my experience with the veterans community is that there is no doubt in people’s minds that if we commit to something, we will deliver it. When it comes to ID cards, the hon. Lady is more than welcome to hold me to account in the year ahead.

Government Information Campaigns: Local Media

5. **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Government information campaigns in local media. [902663]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): The Government monitor the effectiveness of our communication campaigns. We recognise the enormous trust that the public have in local media and the important role that local media therefore play in spreading our messages. As just one example, a recent press partnership on access to NHS services used local media to inform the public about where to seek medical advice. Some 67% of readers said that they trusted the articles, highlighting local print’s importance to communities.

Sir John Whittingdale: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the power of local media in getting vital health messages across, but will he look at ensuring that, as well as local print media, local online-only publishers such as Nub News are included in future campaigns?

Alex Burghart: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about the subject. “All in, all together” harnessed the power of local media and was particularly effective in reaching specific audiences to spread vital information. As he will appreciate, sometimes we want a more targeted approach to get better cost-effectiveness. I should also say that we use OmniGOV, and any local outlet—online or otherwise—that wishes to be on the list can apply by contacting OmniGOV directly.

Civil Service: Recruitment

6. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Whether he is taking steps to increase the number of senior civil servants recruited from the private sector. [902664]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): We have strengthened the policy of advertising senior civil service jobs externally by default. To increase private sector recruitment and attract a broader range of applicants, new guidance will support Departments working with external search providers to identify new and experienced talent to join our excellent colleagues delivering for the country.

Michael Fabricant: But it is not just about senior civil servants. I think middle-ranking and junior civil servants could also benefit from a fresh influx of the dynamism and different attitudes that people from the private sector may enjoy, so why is my right hon. Friend not chasing those people for middle-ranking civil service positions too?

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend is always the very embodiment of dynamism. I absolutely agree: there is a huge amount of talent that we seek, and I am delighted to say that our focus is not just on the senior civil service. We wish to go and get the very best all the way through. Our apprenticeship schemes have been launched for the next three years, and we want to have 5% of the entire civil service formed of apprentices. That is yet another example of how we are reaching out to all starters to make certain that we get the very best talent.

Infected Blood: Support

8. **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support victims of the infected blood scandal. [902666]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): The Government ensured that all infected and bereaved partners who are registered on the UK support schemes received an interim payment of £100,000 in October, thus meeting Sir Brian Langstaff’s interim recommendation in full. That builds on support already provided, but I want to make it absolutely clear that those interim payments are the start and not the end of this process. Work continues.

Wendy Morton: As my right hon. Friend knows, there are thousands of victims of this historic blood scandal up and down the country. I know from some of my

constituents just how traumatic that is, and how hard they have been campaigning, for a long time, to right what we recognise as an historic wrong. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is critical for the Government to be ready to respond to the Langstaff report as soon as possible?

Jeremy Quin: It is indeed critical, and we commissioned the compensation framework study to ensure that we could be ready to respond quickly to the inquiry's recommendations. It was a pleasure to meet the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, from whom we may hear shortly. Work is ongoing, and I hope to give the House a further update as soon as possible on how that work is progressing and how we will continue to take it forward.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank the Paymaster General for meeting the Father of the House and me last week. May I remind him how difficult it has been to build trust with this group of people who have been infected and affected and have been treated so badly over so many decades? The Government promised a statement to the House in response to the review by Sir Robert Francis KC of the framework for compensation. Can the Paymaster General specify a date on which we will be given that statement?

Jeremy Quin: Let me first acknowledge all the tireless work done by campaigners—those infected and those affected—and by those who supported them in the House and outside, including the right hon. Lady and the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley). These are dreadful circumstances, and we are determined to be ready for Langstaff's report, which, presumably, will be published midway through next year. That is why Sir Robert Francis was commissioned to undertake his study.

I think that, in part, our actions in making the interim payment—thus meeting the interim recommendations in full—speak for themselves, but I understand the right hon. Lady's point. I look forward to updating the House as soon as possible about the work we have done and will continue to do, and to updating it further on the progress towards the completion of Langstaff's report.

Government Estate: Running Costs

10. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the running costs of the Government estate. [902669]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): Since 2010 the size of the central general purpose estate has been reduced by 30%, which has cut annual running costs by £1.6 billion. The "Government Property Strategy 2022-2030", published in August, commits us to making further estate operating cost savings of £500 million by 2025 by relocating London roles, co-locating in multi-agency hubs, and selling surplus property.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The German Government have limited temperatures in public buildings to 19°C. Double that and add 30, and it is a balmy 68° in English money. We could put on an extra layer and do a lot better, couldn't we?

Alex Burghart: I feel that my right hon. Friend could survive in sub-19°C temperatures without an extra layer, but, as he will know, the Health and Safety Executive issues advice on temperatures in workplaces. Regulations suggest that the minimum temperature for indoor working should be at least 16°C, or 13° where rigorous physical effort is required. We have the flexibility to take that action, should we wish to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Could use be made of empty Government properties? Given that bitterly cold weather is hitting the UK with a vengeance this week, have the Minister and the Cabinet Office considered making properties in city centres available to provide warm and dry places for those who are struggling with homelessness?

Alex Burghart: As ever, the hon. Gentleman has raised an important issue, and if he has any specific buildings in mind, I shall be happy to meet him to discuss it.

GREAT Britain and Northern Ireland Campaign

11. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the GREAT Britain and Northern Ireland Campaign in encouraging investment in the UK. [902670]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Oliver Dowden): The GREAT campaign has been highly effective in promoting the United Kingdom around the world for the past 10 years. In the last year alone, it has attracted more than £60 million of foreign investment, and has helped to generate more than £400 million from international students and a potential further £600 million of export investment and tourism returns.

Mrs Murray: I recently campaigned for part of my constituency to be an investment zone, and I was pleased when the council put forward Torpoint and Liskeard. What are the Government's current plans for the proposed investment zones, as a lot of work was put into these proposals?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I pay tribute to her tireless work in promoting her constituency and the wider county of Cornwall. The Government are committed to supporting local growth and to levelling up areas across the country, including the south-west and Cornwall. As the Chancellor announced in his autumn statement, the Government intend to take forward a refocused investment zone programme. We will shortly announce further details.

Government Hubs

12. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What progress his Department has made on establishing Government hubs outside London. [902671]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): I am delighted to confirm that good progress is being made on the Government hubs programme. Phase 1 has been completed by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, delivering 14 hubs across the UK, including two in Scotland and one each in Wales and Northern Ireland. Phase 2, led by the Government Property Agency,

opened one hub last year in Birmingham, and further hubs are currently being delivered outside London in locations such as Bristol, Stoke and Peterborough.

Rachael Maskell: York has long been promised a Government hub—indeed, it was once promised the House of Lords, as the Minister might remember—but we have not yet seen the Government's proposals. The hub's nature and size seem to keep changing. Will he meet me to talk about the Government's proposal and to ensure it can be co-produced so that it not only benefits the civil service but benefits York?

Alex Burghart: I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that. The Cabinet Office is committed to growth in York, and Cabinet Office jobs, including in United Kingdom Security Vetting, are likely to move to a new hub in York in 2027. We are actively considering options on the location, and we will update the House in due course.

Public Spending: Value for Money

13. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure value for money in public spending. [902674]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): The Cabinet Office and His Majesty's Treasury publish mandatory standards, such as the Green Book commercial standards, enforced through central controls and training. The Infrastructure and Projects Authority shapes the work of Government and, from last year, the Evaluation Task Force is helping to ensure value for money. In its first year, the taskforce advised 169 programmes covering £82 billion of spend.

Alex Cunningham: Under the Conservative Government's crony approach to public spending, taxpayers' money has been irresponsibly and unforgivably wasted. Some £9 billion was spent on PPE and written off, with £2.6 billion spent on items not suitable for the NHS. Does the Minister agree that the Prime Minister, who oversaw that waste when he was Chancellor, should not only hang his head in shame but go after the money and get it back?

Jeremy Quin: In the Cabinet Office, through the Public Sector Fraud Authority, we have an extremely effective body targeted at going after fraud where it happens. It is an unfortunate reality that any Government who do a lot are prey to fraudsters. We will always tackle and go after fraud, which is exactly what this Government are doing.

Civil Service: Industrial Relations

14. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the state of industrial relations in the civil service. [902676]

16. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the state of industrial relations in the civil service. [902679]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): The Cabinet Office is not the employer of all civil servants, and Departments are responsible

for engaging with recognised trade unions at departmental and local level. The Public and Commercial Services Union is currently in dispute with a number of civil service employers and has called for strike action in several Departments. We remain open to continued dialogue to bring about a resolution.

Mary Glendon: Following a ballot of more than 150,000 civil servant PCS members, a massive 86.2% voted for strike action on pay, pensions, job cuts and redundancy terms. The strikes will start next week at the Driving and Vehicle Standards Agency, National Highways and the Rural Payments Agency. Does the Minister accept that responsibility for this situation lies firmly with his Government for imposing an insulting pay deal of just under 3%—a substantial real-terms pay cut—amid a cost of living crisis?

Jeremy Quin: As the hon. Lady said, 214 ballots took place and 124 hit the relevant thresholds for strike action. That is something I greatly regret, because it will impact the citizens of this country and how they go about their day-to-day work. We will do our utmost to mitigate that and protect the people from the impact of those strikes, but they should not be taking place and I very much regret that they are. I hope that the hon. Lady and this House will recognise that with inflation at 11%, providing an 11% increase across the public sector would equate to about £28 billion—just under £1,000 per household. So I really regret that the unions have felt it necessary to take this action. Our door remains open; we would like to speak to them. We would rather that this was not taking place, but we have to be realistic about the constraints on public expenditure at present.

Chris Stephens: I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. With workers in 124 Government departments and public bodies now having that mandate for strike action, a responsible Government would get around the table for meaningful talks with the civil service trade unions. Is that happening? Will the Minister explain how the Government intend to avoid the widespread disruption, and how they plan to bring forward a fair deal on pay, investment in jobs and an end to the attack on terms and conditions for civil service workers?

Jeremy Quin: We will do our utmost to ensure that public services continue and that the public do not suffer as a result of these strikes, although inconvenience is inevitable when strike action of this nature takes place. I regret that it is taking place. I hope that the workers involved will not go on strike and will continue to work in the public interest. We really value the work and the services they do, but there has to be a recognition that the scale of demands being made on us is not affordable for the taxpayer at this time. That is sad, but it is a fact.

Public Procurement

15. **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): What progress the Government have made on enshrining in law the public good, value for money, transparency, integrity, fair treatment of suppliers and non-discrimination as principles of public procurement. [902678]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): The Procurement Bill, which will be debated on Third Reading in the other place on 13 December,

enacts the principles set out in the “Transforming public procurement” Green Paper. Through the combination of objectives set out in clause 12 and specific rules, we will provide clarity to contracting authorities and suppliers about how they should implement the principles.

Richard Burgon: I thank the Minister for his answer. Billions of pounds in covid contracts were handed to those with links to top Tories through the so-called VIP lanes, and much of it was for equipment that was simply unusable, yet the Government’s new Procurement Bill is so full of loopholes that all this could happen again. To help clamp down on this, will the Minister now back putting a new clawback clause in the Bill, so that in future we can get the money back from those who rip off the public?

Alex Burghart: I very much look forward to debating that Bill when it comes to this place, including with the hon. Gentleman. I remind the House that the Bill gives this country the opportunity to rewrite procurement in this country, which we could not have done while we were in the European Union, making it more advantageous to our public services and our businesses, and better for the public.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): We have seen in eye-watering detail this week the price the taxpayer pays when the Government lose control of procurement during a crisis and panic: billions spent on unusable personal protective equipment written off; millions spent on storing that PPE; and millions pocketed by greedy shell companies that failed to deliver. The Government have a responsibility to uphold basic standards and, especially in an emergency, to restore normal controls as soon as possible, so can the Minister explain why the Procurement Bill hands Ministers more power over direct awards than ever before?

Alex Burghart: The Bill sets out a new paradigm for public services to procure in this country. It will move us away from “most economically advantageous” tender to “most advantageous” tender. That means we will be able to take account of things such as transparency, social responsibility and fairness in a way that was not possible under EU legislation.

Civil Service: Apprenticeships

17. **Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to increase apprenticeship opportunities in the civil service. [902681]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): We launched our new three-year civil service apprenticeship strategy back in April 2022. The civil service is committed to having 5% of staff as apprentices by 2025, and we have already recruited more than 3,600 new apprentices for the first half of this financial year.

Anna Firth: In Southend, the brilliant South Essex College works in close partnership with our equally brilliant Essex chamber of commerce to maximise apprenticeship opportunities across Southend. Does my

right hon. Friend agree that the civil service could learn from this excellent example of public-private partnership to increase apprenticeships in the new powerhouse that is the city of Southend?

Jeremy Quin: It is always a pleasure to hear the city of Southend referred to in this place; it brings back happy memories of our friend.

The private sector in Southend West does a brilliant job of promoting apprenticeships, with South Essex College working with the Essex chamber of commerce. I am sure that there are things we can learn. We are determined to progress our own plans for apprentices. They are going well and we can take them forward, but if my hon. Friend has any tips, I would be delighted to meet her and discuss what is happening in the city of Southend.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The Cabinet Office already runs a care leavers’ apprenticeship scheme, which is very welcome, but many care leavers are unable to afford to get on the housing ladder and rent their first property, because they are not able to access a deposit. Will the Minister share the experience and expertise of the Cabinet Office in supporting care leavers across Government? It is sometimes awkward for care leavers to interact with Health, Education and Work and Pensions systems, for example, and they are not able to rely on the financial support of parents, especially in renting their first property. Will the Minister agree to meet me and care leavers from Plymouth to discuss what best practice can be shared so that every care leaver can have the best possible start in adulthood?

Jeremy Quin: That is an interesting idea. I am more than happy to agree to meet the hon. Gentleman and to hear what he has to say, and we will take it from there.

Topical Questions

T1. [902683] **Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Oliver Dowden): Last week, in response to the King’s message, this House passed the Counsellors of State Bill. I thank all Members of the House who ensured that that legislation was passed in a timely and efficient manner. The Cobra unit and the wider Cabinet Office continues to co-ordinate Government activity to ensure resilience, particularly with respect to industrial action and winter pressures. This Government will stand up for hard-working people and do all they can to minimise disruption to their lives and their livelihoods.

This month marks the first anniversary of the National Cyber Security Strategy. The cyber threat is real; Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine has led to a significant increase in the tempo of Russian cyber-attacks. Just last year, there were 2.7 million cyber-related frauds. Our dedicated experts in the National Cyber Security Centre stopped more than 2 million attacks last year, and I wish to place on record my thanks to them and to officials across the Cabinet Office who will continue to work over Christmas to help keep this country safe.

Patricia Gibson: I have tried before, as have others, but we have not really had an answer, so I will give it another go. The UK has written off £10 billion of spending on personal protective equipment that was either unusable, above market value or not even delivered. Alongside that, and perhaps not unrelated to it, we have seen VIP contract lanes for Tory pals and cronies. Who does the Secretary of State think should be held accountable for this colossal waste of money? From where I am standing, there is no reason why anyone can ever trust this Government to deliver value for money for the taxpayer.

Oliver Dowden: I have to say to the hon. Lady that this is an extraordinary exercise in hindsight from the SNP. It should remember the pressure that the state and the country were under at the time of the crisis, and the Government responded effectively to it. That is not just my view, but the view of the Office for Budget Responsibility, which said:

“Those potential costs—
of not acting with such speed—
“cannot be quantified with any precision, but...it is not unreasonable to think that they could have been far greater.” Of course the Government are taking action to deal with that. For example, we have stopped more than £700 million of overclaimed grants, but she must understand the context.

T2. [902685] **Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): The previous Minister for Government efficiency, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), visited Wrexham to discuss its potential under the Places for Growth programme, with a view to locating a civil service Ministry of Justice hub in the city. Will the Minister please give me an update?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): As my hon. Friend mentions, the Government Property Agency is in dialogue with the Cabinet Office's Places for Growth programme team to identify the possible demand for relocating civil service roles to Wrexham. Discussions are ongoing in a number of regions and cities across the country; I am sure she will understand that, until further commercial negotiations are concluded and Departments have informed staff, Government hub locations cannot be confirmed. However, I can confirm that future locations are under active consideration.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the deputy Leader of the Opposition.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It seems I am the only one who got the memo about Save the Children's Christmas jumper today.

Mr Speaker: You are not the only one who got it!

Angela Rayner: I am here to spread the message that gingers are for life, not just for Christmas—with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster as well, of course.

Christmas came early for those on the VIP fast-track lane to get contracts. Many hon. Members on the Opposition Benches are trying to get to the bottom of that and are very frustrated, as are the public. Billions

of pounds were wasted and only those suppliers pushed by Conservative MPs and peers got on that VIP fast-track lane. Why are this Government protecting that fast-track lane and not dealing with it in the Procurement Bill while at the same time telling public sector workers to take a real-terms pay cut? That is galling in the public's eye.

Oliver Dowden: First, in the spirit of consensus, I welcome the right hon. Lady's jumper and, as a fellow ginger, wholly endorse the sentiments on it.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): You are a strawberry blond!

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman says from a sedentary position that I am a strawberry blond; I will take that as about the only compliment I will ever receive from him.

It is not just the jumper that reminds me of Christmas; the repeat question from the Labour party does too. I believe Labour raised it in an urgent question on Tuesday and with the Prime Minister yesterday. I am happy to state again, first, that it was not the case that there was a fast track through: 90% of offers referred through that route were unsuccessful. The high-priority lane was established at a time when many required urgent help, and was subject to proper processes. This was all—

Mr Speaker: Order. Look, I know there are problems with not enough Members in and I know people have been told to go long, but this is topical questions. I cannot say on Monday, “Oh, we have to be short today, because there are lots of Members.” We cannot pick and choose. I am working by the rules of the House and we will continue to do so.

Angela Rayner: The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster mentions the Prime Minister's response yesterday. The Prime Minister said he was “shocked” to hear the allegations, but the Government have known for 10 months and have been dodging our questions on the murky contracts because they are in a so-called mediation process. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster tell me today what progress has been made on the mediation? Will he commit to publishing any final settlement, and can he set a firm deadline for how long he is prepared to let this drag on before taking legal action to claw back every single penny of taxpayers' money?

Oliver Dowden: The right hon. Lady knows we are currently engaged in a mediation process, so it would be wrong for me to comment on the specifics, but we have been very clear that that sort of behaviour is not acceptable. If that is found to have happened, we will not hesitate to take action to recover those moneys.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): NHS dentistry faces many challenges, one of which is ensuring that locally based practices have every opportunity to bid for contracts successfully. Can my hon. Friend set out how the Procurement Bill will enable them to do so?

Alex Burghart: This Government want NHS dental service contracts to be attractive. The intention is that the procurement of healthcare services such as dentistry will be subject to the rules set out under the anticipated

provider selection regime as enacted by the Health and Care Act 2022. The Procurement Bill will apply to other services and help to break down barriers for small businesses of all kinds to engage in public sector procurement.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): On Tuesday the House passed a motion instructing the Government to release all correspondence relating to the awarding of a multi-million-pound contract with PPE Medpro. That motion went through unopposed, and the papers will be released, but shortly before that the Cabinet Office rejected a similar request from the Good Law Project, saying that disclosure would,

"make it harder for the responsible department to secure a sound financial and contractual basis for the future",

concluding that,

"the public interest favours withholding this information".

What changed so dramatically between that reply to the Good Law Project and Tuesday's debate?

Oliver Dowden: We on the Government side respect the will of the House. That motion was passed and we will comply with its terms.

T4. [902687] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), knows that there is a war on. Part of our contribution should be a great national endeavour to cut our energy consumption, should it not?

Alex Burghart: A planned communication programme is coming this winter. Maybe we should be looking at the temperature in this House. Ambient though it is, would it not be better if we all had a chance to put on fresh jumpers to keep warm?

T5. [902688] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): As reported on BBC news this morning, tens of thousands of civil servants who are members of the PCS union have balloted overwhelmingly to strike over the coming weeks and months at Border Force, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, National Highways and the Rural Payments Agency. Is the Minister aware that levels of pay and in-work poverty in some areas of the civil service are such that now the Department for Work and Pension's own staff are themselves increasingly having to claim universal credit? That is a disgrace. What is he going to do about it in terms of increasing the offer?

Jeremy Quin: As I have already said in this House, I very much regret the decision of those concerned to go on strike. I think it will impact people, and I very much regret that that is the decision taken. The hon. Gentleman will have to accept that there are constraints on the public finances, partly because of the money we are providing to ensure that we try to help people through what we recognise is a very serious point at the moment in terms of their personal finances. That support is available to all, including those on lower incomes—including those who may be choosing to go on strike.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): Increasingly, we are living our lives online, whether for banking, shopping, sharing photos or whatever it may be. For many, that is normal, but many of those in our elderly

and vulnerable population are doing it for the first time. On Tuesday this week, the all-party parliamentary group on cyber security heard about some of the threats people are facing, the enormous frauds they are leaning into and the money they are losing as a result. Could my right hon. Friend perhaps explain how the national cyber-security strategy is helping to bolster support for those people as they go online for the first time?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend raises an important point. That is actually a key part of the national cyber-security strategy—not just Government work but supporting businesses and individuals in keeping safe online. In addition, I have discussed with the Home Secretary further steps we can take to bring forward offences in relation to fraud.

T6. [902690] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Party donors such as Clearsprings Ready Homes are making vast profits from the Home Office contracts for accommodation and food for asylum seekers. They are overseeing a murky network of subcontractors who are ripping off the hotels and caterers, and they are generating more than 200 complaints a month. What is the Cabinet Office doing now to ensure value for money and decent standards from those expensive Government contracts?

Jeremy Quin: I assure the hon. Lady that proper process is undergone in terms of procurement. We always look to make certain that we get value for money for the taxpayer, while, at the same time, having a proper and decent service provided, and we will continue to do so.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Now then. In two weeks' time, it will be six years to the day since my wife had a life-saving double lung transplant at the Royal Papworth Hospital. But she has to go to the hospital every three or four months for a check-up. She is lucky because she has me to take her on the 100-mile drive to Papworth, but other transplant patients around the country are not so lucky and have to use public transport—the trains. Can somebody on the Front Bench please reassure me about the measures in place to ensure that trains are running so that people who, like my wife, do not have access to a car can get to places such as Papworth Hospital for life-saving treatment?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend rightly highlights some of the terrible consequences of these strikes for individuals. In respect of the RMT dispute, we have already put forward an offer that is in excess of the average wage settlement in the private sector, and I would strongly urge all members taking part in those strikes to think again about the impact that is having on hardworking people up and down this country.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): The report of Sir Robert Francis KC on the contaminated blood scandal redress scheme was published on 7 June 2022 and made 19 recommendations. It is, frankly, disgraceful that only one of those recommendations has been followed up on. Constituents of mine, such as Marion Nugent, have been fighting for justice. Can the Minister provide assurances that Marion and individuals like her will not be ignored when the Government finally respond to that inquiry?

Jeremy Quin: That study was conducted for a very specific purpose: to ensure that we are ready to respond to Sir Brian Langstaff's report, probably in the middle of next year. I concur with the hon. Lady that we need to be ready and able to respond. The fact that we met in full Sir Brian's interim recommendation of the £100,000 payments was critical. We did that in October. We continue to work, and I hope to update the House further.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Can one of the Ministers advise to what extent the Cabinet Office is involved in negotiations to bring about changes to the Northern Ireland protocol? While we talk a lot about levelling up, there is one area of the United Kingdom being very much disadvantaged by that protocol.

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend raises an important point. In terms of engagement on the Northern Ireland protocol, work is ongoing through the Foreign Office, the Foreign Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary, and, as ever, the Cabinet Office plays a role in co-ordinating Government efforts, including in this area.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I chaired yesterday morning perhaps the most moving session I can remember in my 21 years as an MP, when kids with brain injuries talked to MPs about the changes that need to happen. Listening to Victoria, Amelia, Eden, Spike and Oscar, who is just seven years old, talk about their brain injuries and how they have been treated in the health service and in schools was gut-wrenching. They are amazing children, every single one of them, with such confidence. As we create a national strategy for acquired brain injury, will the Cabinet Office and the other Departments that are part of this put all their effort into ensuring that children get an opportunity to prosper, even if they have had a stroke at the age of seven?

Oliver Dowden: I know what a passionate advocate the hon. Gentleman is on acquired brain injuries. He may know that I took a close interest in this when I was Culture Secretary and started gathering evidence in relation to acquired brain injuries in sporting incidents. I wholeheartedly endorse all the points he makes and will make sure the Cabinet Office plays its role.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): In the west midlands, our Mayor Andy Street is an excellent ambassador and champion for the region, and he understands why boosting skills and investment really matters, including for businesses in my constituency. How much more could the Government use the GREAT initiative to further boost skills and enterprise right across the country?

Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. In fact, I met the Mayor of the west midlands just two days ago. We did not have GREAT on the agenda on that occasion, but as the Minister responsible for GREAT, I shall certainly pick up the points she raises.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): Do the Government have a view on whether there should be an upper limit to the size of the House of Lords, and if so, what should it be?

Alex Burghart: The Government do not have a view on the upper limit of the House of Lords. The House of Lords contains a great many with expertise that the hon. Gentleman could learn from.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): The planned trade union strikes threaten to disrupt not just Christmas and rail services but essential health services. Southend University Hospital is doing brilliantly in bringing on-stream two new ambulance handover units and a new winter ward. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that he will put in place contingency plans to ensure that my constituents have access to emergency healthcare at Christmas?

Oliver Dowden: The Cabinet Office is working hard with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that we have the best possible contingencies. However, there is only one way we can ensure that this disruption is totally minimised, and that is by calling off this unreasonable strike; I urge the unions to do so.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): We are spending £700,000 a day on storing personal protective equipment in China. That is enough to put almost 19,000 children, including those in North Tyneside, in full-time nursery. Does the Minister think this is an efficient use of taxpayers' money?

Jeremy Quin: That is a decision for the Department of Health and Social Care. I gently remind the hon. Lady that that PPE was required for any reason. To have had access to PPE is helpful. There is a lot of hindsight being applied to the circumstances we found ourselves in at the start of covid. It is obviously right that we maintain sufficient levels of PPE, and it is up to the Department of Health and Social Care to determine where and how it is stored and at what cost.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The city of Lichfield is currently experiencing a huge amount of house building, which happens in other parts of the country too, so I welcome the Government's decision that the number of houses to be built should be advisory not mandatory. Along with those houses, there is a need for hospitals, schools and leisure centres. What does the Cabinet Office do to co-ordinate all those different Government Departments to ensure that those facilities are available for the extra people who will move into the area?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend rightly highlights the need to ensure that infrastructure goes with development. Clearly, that is led by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, but the Cabinet Office continues to monitor progress against the agreed goals of that Department and to work closely with it.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What discussions has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Work and Pensions about providing support to the 60,000 British military veterans with frozen pensions who live in countries that do not have a reciprocal uprating agreement with the UK?

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): I have regular conversations with Ministers in the DWP and MOD about the pensions issue. The hon. Lady knows full well the history of the issue where pensions are changed after agreements have been made. We are constantly looking at that and I am more than happy to meet her to discuss where we are.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): We are very much looking forward to the opening of our new armed forces hub in Scunthorpe in the new year. I am pleased that the census collected data on who and where our veterans are. Can the Minister say more about the plans of the Office for Veterans' Affairs to use that data to further improve the services that we offer to veterans?

Johnny Mercer: For the first time since the second world war, when people started campaigning to have a question about veterans on the census, that appeared last year. That has given us a real granularity to the data around veterans, which we can use to formulate our policies and ensure that, wherever they are in the country, their acute needs are met by the third sector and by statutory provision as we make this the best country in the world to be a veteran.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): In response to my earlier question, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General said that they were focused on fraud and on taking action. How many police inquiries are ongoing into PPE contract fraud? When can we expect any of the big-time fraudsters to be brought to justice?

Jeremy Quin: I do not think I would be in a position to discuss police inquiries in this place, so I have nothing to say in response to the hon. Gentleman's question.

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, veterans are close to my heart, and none more so than the nuclear test veterans. Will he ensure that the £450,000 that we have already invested in projects to commemorate their service will preserve their testimony for years to come?

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to all those who campaigned for the nuclear test veterans, who were awarded their medals, as announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister two weeks ago. We are spending that sum to make sure that we properly capture their experiences. Their duty and their sacrifice for the nation will not be forgotten.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): To help and support veterans with additional cold weather payments, has the Department liaised with the Ministry of Defence to ensure that none of our veterans is left shivering in the dark this winter?

Johnny Mercer: None of our veterans should be left shivering in the dark this winter. Cold weather payments and grants from the Royal British Legion are available to support those who are at a particularly vulnerable point in their lives. Help is available if veterans speak up and reach out. Many people are prepared to help them, so no veteran should be cold and suffering this winter.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): As we head towards Christmas, my mind turns to the hundreds of hampers of local produce that I will deliver to veterans in Christmas week, which gives me the opportunity to thank them for their service. I come across veterans who feel isolated and often do not know how to access services. Can my right hon. Friend set out the support that is available to veterans who may feel isolated in the run-up to Christmas?

Johnny Mercer: Isolation is a huge challenge for veterans who have left the military, and what we are trying to do in the Office for Veterans' Affairs is build dedicated clear pathways for those who are isolated, homeless or particularly vulnerable. Homelessness is a particular issue around this time of year—veterans are under-represented in the homeless population, but one is one too many—and I will have more to say about this before Christmas.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is not just Baroness Mone who made obscene profits out of VIP lane-awarded contracts for PPE purchases. *Private Eye* has long highlighted other companies that made record profits through this process. When are the Government going to review all the contracts awarded through the VIP lane and try to recover money, instead of allowing people to profiteer from the pandemic?

Oliver Dowden: We have made a lot of progress in recovering moneys. For example, our checks prevented over £2 billion of fraud on bounce back loans and we have stopped over £700 million in over-claimed grants. We have invested £100 million to set up a taxpayer protection taskforce, which is expected to recover up to £1 billion by 2022-23.

Mr Speaker: Marvellous! We did have plenty of time and we have not stopped early, so the Whips need not panic in the future.

Seasonal Worker Visas: Sponsorship Certificates

10.31 am

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make a statement on the issuing of certificates of sponsorship for seasonal workers' visas.

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for asking this urgent question. The Home Office recognises the importance of the UK food and drink sector, and the agricultural industry that supplies it. The seasonal agricultural workers scheme exists to support those businesses and ensure that they have the labour they need. The quota for 2022 was 38,000 workers for the edible and ornamental horticulture sector, and a further 2,000 for the poultry sector. That quota has not yet been met, and the Home Office's management data suggest that about 1,400 places remain.

An announcement on the 2023 scheme is imminent. My Department and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be making that statement very soon. In the meantime, workers already in the United Kingdom under the seasonal agricultural workers scheme can continue to take other work placements and to stay in the UK for up to six months, even if that involves remaining here into 2023. Further workers can avail themselves of the remaining 1,400 certificates and enter the UK this year—even if, again, that means staying into 2023—for the duration of their six-month placement. My Department is committed to supporting this important sector and to working with stakeholders to improve the delivery of schemes such as the one for seasonal agricultural workers.

George Eustice: The seasonal worker visa scheme has been a tremendous success—perhaps one of the most successful Home Office policies in recent years—and this year it has provided about two thirds of the labour needs of the horticultural sector. However, there have been some serious problems with administration. In particular, scheme operators need to be issued with an allocation of certificates of sponsorship now, so that they can recruit people and secure the visas necessary for workers to start in January.

Last year, the Home Office allowed certificates of sponsorship in 2021 to be used as the basis for workers arriving in January 2022. This year, for reasons that have not been properly explained, Home Office officials have taken a decision not to allow that and have made it clear to operators that they cannot use that route. Indeed, I understand that they have closed the ability to issue certificates of sponsorship from the end of November, so that no one at the moment is able to issue them.

There are two legitimate courses of action. One would be to allow the same situation to apply as last year, and enable the remaining certificates of sponsorship for this year to be used for workers arriving in January. The second course of action would be to make a provisional allocation of certificates of sponsorship on the sponsorship management system run by the Home Office. This could be done very easily and would enable operators to recruit staff in the next few weeks.

That is of critical importance to the daffodil industry in my constituency. Daffodil growers currently have around a third of their staff from last year's scheme, a third of them being settled EU citizens. At the moment they are going to have a gap of between 30% and 40% of their staffing needs, which will be catastrophic for the industry by the end of January. So will the Minister take immediate action directing his officials to put a provisional allocation of certificates for sponsorship on to the Home Office sponsorship management system?

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who of course brings more expertise to this issue than anybody in the House. He rightly says that the seasonal agricultural workers scheme has been a success and is an important contributor to the food and drink sector in this country, but he raises important issues, and I intend to take them up with my officials.

Parts of the sector, such as the daffodil industry, require workers early in the year, meaning that we need to take steps to ensure that those businesses can make sensible recruitment decisions in good time, and not leave these decisions, as has happened too often, to the eleventh hour. I appreciate that last year the decision on the seasonal agricultural workers scheme was announced on Christmas eve, which no doubt was a cause of significant frustration for those working in the sector. I will work intensively with my officials to ensure that we get that decision out as quickly as possible.

In the interim, two options are available to the industry: first, to make use of workers already in the UK under the seasonal agricultural workers scheme who have been doing other work until now but might want to move into a sector such as daffodils as quickly as possible for the remainder of their time in the UK; secondly, new individuals could enter the UK under the scheme using the undercapacity within the 2022 placement, and stay into 2023.

My right hon. Friend raises with me this morning the issue that the Home Office has frozen certificates, making it impossible for employers to bring people in and make use of the remaining certificates in this year's quota. I have been informed by my officials this morning that nothing has changed from the way the scheme worked last year. If that is incorrect, I will change that today and ensure that the scheme is unfrozen so that important employers such as those my right hon. Friend rightly represents can make use of the remaining certificates before the end of the year. If it is correct that the Home Office has frozen these certificates, I apologise to businesses who have been inadvertently inconvenienced by that and I hope that the Environment Secretary and I can resolve this as quickly as possible.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) for asking this urgent question today. He has drawn attention to concerns faced by the daffodil industry in Cornwall—a place I hope to visit over the Christmas break; I am often in his constituency—and those concerns are shared by sectors throughout these industries.

The National Farmers Union says that as much as £60 million of food has been wasted on farms due to labour shortages. During a cost of living crisis, that is disgraceful. Where shortages are linked to pay and

[*Jess Phillips*]

conditions, those must be improved, and we will work with industry to deliver. However, countries across the world require seasonal schemes to help support agriculture and horticulture. We need a properly delivered seasonal worker scheme, announced in advance with long-term action to tackle shortages, not panicked short-term announcements without any underlying strategy.

The average time taken to process a sponsorship application has more than trebled over recent years, meaning less certainty for business and more produce going to waste. What steps is the Minister taking to reduce that time? The Home Office has been warned about exploitation in this scheme, including from the results of a Government review last year and reports of recruitment fees charged by agents abroad. Have those warnings been listened to, and what safeguards have been introduced to ensure serious exploitation is not allowed to continue? Finally, this is the latest in a long series of delays, backlogs and chaos from the Home Office. It is not fair on the public and it is not fair on the sectors that rely on the Government to run smoothly; can we confidently say that this is a Home Office we can trust to get a grip?

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for those points. The scheme is broadly operating as it is designed to, which is shown by the fact that about 1,400 certificates are unused as of today's date. So the overall quota of 40,000 places a year is approximately the right number. We are, as ever, discussing with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether that quota should remain the same next year or be higher. A statement on that will be made imminently. However, the decision made by my Department—with my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice)—to choose 40,000 appears to have been about the right number.

In terms of the scheme's operation, we need to ensure that it is as smooth as possible because no business deserves to be put through unnecessary bureaucracy to gain access to the workers it needs. The hon. Lady is right to say that, although of course we want to make the best use of our domestic workforce, there will always be—as there has been—a need for some seasonal workers to come into the UK from overseas. That is exactly why the scheme exists.

On ensuring that those who come under the scheme are properly looked after and not abused, every one of the four or five operators of the scheme is licensed by the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, and it is its responsibility, together with my Department, to ensure that those seasonal workers are looked after appropriately and do not fall inadvertently into modern slavery or other poor practices. We at the Home Office have a duty to ensure that those individuals come for the right reasons, that their employers treat them appropriately and that the scheme is not abused. There is a significant minority of people who come under the scheme and subsequently choose to apply for asylum, which is one of the many things that we have to take seriously when deciding the number of individuals who can enter under the scheme each year, but I am certainly sympathetic to the needs of our food and drink sector and will work closely with the Environment Secretary to choose the

right number of places for next year. As I said in answer to my right hon. Friend, we will make an announcement soon.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) on getting the urgent question. Businesses need certainty, but one other issue that my right hon. Friend the Minister mentioned is the level of compliance with the scheme. Will he update the House on that? If the level of compliance is very positive, expanding the scheme to encourage more people to come to this country for short terms of working and then returning would be a sensible way forward.

Robert Jenrick: Compliance with the scheme is generally high, but I would not underestimate the number of individuals who do overstay or claim asylum. We have seen a significant number of those individuals this year. There have been some exceptional factors this year such as events in Russia and Ukraine that mean that some individuals would be inclined to stay here and claim asylum. The Home Office needs to take that seriously, because several hundred individuals claiming asylum is a significant number abusing the system as it is designed.

My hon. Friend is right to say that there will be occasions when any sector will need to rely on itinerant labour from overseas, but we must also remember that we have more than 5 million people in this country who are economically inactive, and we have a duty as a Government to help more of them into the workforce here so that they can lead fulfilling and productive lives and make a contribution to British society. That should be the first duty of the Government when designing our immigration policies.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Minister might want to look at the failed Pick for Britain scheme in reference to those comments. The National Farmers Union's findings suggest a shocking £60 million-worth of food had been wasted in the first half of the year because of labour shortages. Of course, if the UK Government had listened to the SNP, free movement would be presenting a solution to many of these issues.

Will the Minister now listen to calls from Scotland's External Affairs Secretary and consider a 24-month temporary visa rather than the short-term sticking plaster approach that we have seen so far? Will he also consider the proposal made by the SNP Government in 2020 through which migrants wanting to work in Scotland could choose to apply for a Scottish visa as well as the Scottish Government's call for a rural visa pilot to meet the distinct needs of Scotland's remote rural and island areas? Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Switzerland all operate successful visa systems that offer a tailored response to the immigration needs of those countries. Why do UK Ministers insist on such a rigid one-size-fits-all approach?

Robert Jenrick: There is no significant evidence to suggest that the UK labour market varies so greatly between the nations that we need to take different approaches in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. It is

better that we remain within the United Kingdom and that we have one single immigration policy covering the whole Union.

On the hon. Lady's central suggestion that leaving the European Union has led to a diminution of workers available within the economy, that simply is not true. We have just seen figures published showing that net migration was over 500,000 last year and that 1 million people entered the UK last year. They are very substantial numbers. The Home Office issued 350,000 work visas last year. We are ultimately a small country with finite resources, limited housing and pressure on public services. It is right that the Government take their responsibilities seriously, take decisions in the round and try, over time, to bring down net migration.

The seasonal agricultural worker scheme exists to fill in some gaps. The choice of 40,000 does appear to have been broadly borne out by the evidence that we are close to the end of the year and there are still 1,400 places outstanding, so the decision made by my predecessors has been broadly correct. We are in the process of analysing whether we need to continue or expand it next year, and I will make a statement on that very soon.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Horticultural operations around Lichfield will, I think, be very reassured by what my right hon. Friend has said today. When I voted for Brexit, I voted for sovereignty. I certainly did not vote to say that we should not have immigration—with a name like Fabricant, which originates in France, I would certainly not be against that. It is illegal immigration that we all object to. Is the Home Office investigating other processes to get seasonal workers in the UK, for example the system that the SNP representative, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), spoke about for a two-year validity?

Robert Jenrick: I am sympathetic to the proposal that we create a scheme that is of multi-year duration, enabling employers to plan over the longer term. We have just been through one or two of the most exceptional years in which access to labour was heavily reduced as a result of covid and travel restrictions, but now would seem to be a sensible time to explore whether we can create a longer-term scheme that gives industry the certainty it requires. We also need to be working closely with the agricultural sector itself, to ensure that it is embracing automation and new technologies, and training the next generation of British workers to enter the sector and enjoy successful careers. As I said in answer to an earlier question, we have 5 million economically inactive people in this country and we need to draw on our domestic labour force as much as possible.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): A former chief of MI5, the noble Baroness Eliza Manningham-Buller, has called for an increase in visas for seasonal workers to enhance national security, ensuring that the UK produces its own food. Can the Minister confirm that food production is a matter of national security? The Minister referred to a statement that was imminent. Can he say what specific work has been undertaken across Government to ensure that we have a scheme that is evidence based and properly resourced for seasonal workers?

Robert Jenrick: The events of the past few years have taught us all the importance of resilience in many different respects, including food security. That is a factor that we at the Home Office take into consideration, as I know does the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, as we enter into regular discussions. I will be making an announcement with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs very soon, so that we can give as much confidence and certainty as possible to the industry.

However, to return to the remarks that I have made on a number of occasions, this year's quota of 40,000 does not appear to be wildly out of sync with the industry's needs, as it appears that we will end the year with about 40,000 certificates having been applied for. Given that the scheme is either at that level or even undersubscribed, it is difficult to make the case for a very significant increase in the number of places for next year. However, I will not prejudice the decision that we will come to, and we are sympathetic to the clear labour shortages and issues that some parts of the industry are experiencing.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) on securing this important urgent question. The seasonal worker visa scheme is simply one symptom of a broader disease, which is that we do not have an immigration system that is designed to produce the workforce that different sectors need. Let me bring to the Minister's attention another area that has been a problem for years: the need for crew for fishing boats. We finally have a visa scheme, but we are still not getting the crew because of the level of the written English language test that they are required to pass. Even when Ministers introduce schemes, the implementation by officials still thwarts the industry's needs and the policy of Ministers.

Robert Jenrick: I am very alive to those issues. I will shortly meet a delegation from the fishing industry that has been organised at the request of other Members. If the right hon. Gentleman would like to join that, I would be more than happy to extend the invitation.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Farm businesses across the south-west are facing a double whammy of crises: rising energy costs are putting their prices up and a shortage of labour is pushing many farmers to the brink. They are looking for an immigration system that means that crops will not rot in the fields—it is as simple as that. They are not interested in the total cap; they just want the output. Will the Minister set, as a test for the policy, that in order for it to be successful, no crops—whether fruit, vegetables or ornamental flowers—will be ploughed into the field next year? That is the metric of success that farmers want from the Minister. Will he set that as his metric on whether the policy works or is a failure?

Robert Jenrick: We take into account all those considerations in formulating the policy, and we need to consider other factors as well. We need to ensure that we draw on our domestic workforce as much as we can, and that we do not always reach for foreign labour. We also need to ensure that those coming to the country comply with the scheme. As I said, that is broadly correct, but there are a significant minority who do not,

[Robert Jenrick]

including several hundred who claim asylum each year. That is rightly a concern for the Home Office and we need to consider that when choosing the ultimate number of individuals to participate in the scheme. I know that the hon. Member will appreciate that.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): There are just 16 days to Christmas and the National Farmers Union is reporting that food will be left rotting in the fields and that poultry cannot be slaughtered. What innovative extra things can the Minister do to get that food on the shelves and to help keep rising prices down for struggling families?

Robert Jenrick: The scheme exists for exactly that purpose. At the danger of repeating myself, having a quota of 40,000 has proved to be approximately what the industry requires. The other thing that Opposition Members could do to ensure that food gets to our tables this Christmas is to have a word with their union paymasters, because Border Force officials, sadly, are going on strike over the Christmas period, which will have a significant impact on the operation of our ports and airports.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): Northern Ireland's fishing industry, in places such as Kilkeel and Ardglass, is at risk of decimation because seasonal workers have not been included on the exemption list so far. That puts at risk the whole supply chain. If there is nothing to land and process, there is nothing for our distributors and nothing for our magnificent hospitality sector to put on its menus. Will the Minister confirm whether Northern Ireland fishing industry workers will go on the exemption list? Will he further explore the possibility of regional visas, because there are substantial differences not only in types of economic activity, but in salaries around the regions of the UK?

Robert Jenrick: I will shortly be meeting representatives from the Northern Ireland fishing sector. I think the issue arose in a Westminster Hall debate that the hon. Lady organised, so if she would like to participate, I am more than happy to extend an invitation to her. From the data that I have seen, I do not think that there are

material differences in the wages and labour challenges in the different nations of the UK, or at least not such as to warrant the very significant change of having different immigration rules and procedures in different parts of the UK.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Have Ministers consulted supermarkets and other UK retailers? How are their concerns about the risks that the visa presents of human rights abuses and bondage in supply chains being addressed?

Robert Jenrick: A key priority for me and for the Department is to ensure that those who come to the UK under the scheme do so legitimately and are properly looked after by their employers. For that reason, we ensure that the operators of the scheme are licensed by the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority—that is a very important element of the scheme. In considering its future, we continue to review the number of individuals who claim asylum, make modern slavery applications and so on.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Unsurprisingly, I too want to ask a question about the fishing sector, which has opportunities and jobs available but is having great difficulties filling them. I participated in the Westminster Hall debate with the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), and asked the same question—it is in *Hansard*. In our discussions afterwards, I also asked the Minister about a meeting with the fish producer organisations to discuss how we can use the present visa system. They are offering £25,000, with accommodation and food, and have put forward positive suggestions to address the English language capability issue. I am very encouraged by what the Minister has said about the meeting. May I respectfully ask him to let us have it as soon as possible? The POs want to meet before Christmas.

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman was the originator of the meeting, which is now growing into a fairly substantial one—we will have to get a larger room. I will make sure that it is in the diary as soon as possible. I look forward to meeting him and other concerned colleagues.

Called-in Planning Decision: West Cumbria

10.57 am

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement following the decision I made yesterday to grant planning permission for a new metallurgical coalmine at Whitehaven in Cumbria.

I think it is important to stress at the beginning of my statement that I am speaking with regard to a planning decision that I have taken in my capacity as Secretary of State in what is a quasi-judicial process. Members of the House will be aware that the decision may, of course, be subject to a legal challenge, so I urge all Members of the House who are interested in the decision to read the decision letter, which was published yesterday, alongside the detailed report of the independent planning inspector who oversaw the public inquiry into the proposals. Any mature and considered response needs to take account of both my decision letter and the planning inspector's full report.

I would like to refer in my statement to some of the arguments that the planning inspector has entertained and some of the arguments that he has made in the course of his report, but nothing that I say at the Dispatch Box should be taken in any way as a substitute for full engagement with the inspector's report.

It is important to note that it is rare that any planning decision is an open-and-shut matter. There are almost always competing elements for and against any planning scheme—particularly a substantial one of this kind, which can raise serious and passionate debate—but the open and transparent public inquiry system allows all those issues to be fully explored. It also allows all parties to put their case before an independent inspector.

The decision that I issued yesterday was in line directly with the recommendation of the inspector, who heard all the evidence for and against the scheme and was able to test that evidence through the participation of interested parties. This was a comprehensive and thorough process, lasting over a month and hearing from over 40 different witnesses. It is summarised in a report of over 350 pages, which, again, I urge all hon. Members to read.

I think it important to restate—as I think is well understood—that the proposal granted permission yesterday for the production of coking coal for use in steel production is not an energy proposal. Our net zero strategy makes it clear that coal has no part to play in future power generation, which is why we will be phasing it out of our electricity supply by 2024. Coal's share of our electricity supply has already declined significantly in recent years. It was almost 40% of our energy supply in 2012, and less than 2% in 2020.

I took account of the facts in reviewing the planning application, as did the inspector, taking into particular account the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy industrial decarbonisation strategy of March 2021, which explicitly does not rule out the use of coking coal in an integrated steel-making process, and makes it clear that, together with carbon capture and storage, that can be part of a net zero-compliant option.

It is important to note, as the inspector makes plain on page 239 of the report, that it is clear all the scenarios and forecasts for the future use of coking coal

which were put before the inquiry demonstrated a continued demand for coking coal for a number of decades to come. It is also important to state that the European Commission, as the inspector noted, recognised the indispensable role of coking coal during the steel industry's transition to climate neutrality.

It is also important to note, as the inspector did on page 238, that the UK is currently almost wholly dependent on imports of coking coal to meet its steel manufacturing demand. In 2017, 98.8% of the more than 3 million tonnes of coking coal used in UK steel plants was imported. The main exporters of coking coal at the moment are Australia, the USA and, of course, Russia. European metallurgical coal demand is forecast to remain between 50 and 55 million tonnes per annum for the next 28 years, and in the UK demand is forecast to remain at the current level of 1.5 million tonnes per annum.

The coking coal that will be extracted from the mine in Whitehaven is of a particular quality. Coking coal is usually a blended product of soft and hard high volatile coals and low volatile coals. The coal from the proposed mine would have a low ash content of below 5%, compared with between 7% and 8% for US coal and 10% for Australian coal. It would also have a low phosphorus content, lower than that of Australian coal, and a high fluidity. It is also important to note that, while the sulphur content of this coal has been referred to, and it is relatively high, the evidence before the inspector suggests that the coal handling and processing plant will produce coal with an average sulphur content of 1.4 %, and the applicant has stated its acceptance of the planning condition to ensure the product leaving the mine meets this level.

It is also important to note that the applicant is making it clear that this will be the only net zero metallurgical coking coalmine in the world. It is vitally important that all of us recognise—as the inspector does on page 255—that the proposed development would to some extent support the transition to a low-carbon future specifically as a consequence of the provision of a currently needed resource from a mine that aspires to be net zero. I think it is also important that we recognise that, in any change of land use, there will always be a potential impact on biodiversity and on the local environment as well. Again, it is important to note that, on page 278 of his report, the inspector makes it clear that this mine would not cause any unacceptable impacts on ecology or result in a net loss of biodiversity. The inspector also makes it clear in paragraph 22.9 that the proposed development itself would have an overall neutral effect on climate change, and as such there would be no material conflict with Government policies for meeting the challenge of climate change.

Taking account of all these environmental considerations, we should also bear in mind the impact on employment and on the economy, locally and nationally. As the inspectorate notes on page 279, the mine will directly create 532 jobs, which will make a substantial contribution to local employment opportunities because they will be skilled and well-paid jobs. The employment, and indirect employment, that would follow will result in a significant contribution to the local and regional economy, with increased spending in local shops, facilities and services. In addition, the exportation of some of the coal to European markets will make a significant contribution

[Michael Gove]

to the UK balance of payments. It is therefore the case that granting the application is compliant with planning policy, and the social and economic benefits should be afforded substantial weight.

The inspector's report makes a strong case, in a balanced way, for the granting of permission. After reading the inspector's report in full, I am satisfied, in my role as Secretary of State, that it is the right thing to do to grant this planning application.

Mr Speaker: Order. The statement I received was the thinnest ever, but the Minister has gone long. Between that and what the Opposition and I have been provided with, there is something missing, which is not in accordance with the ministerial code. We do not work like that. The shadow Secretary of State has not been able to read what has just been said. I am going to suspend the House in order to try to find out what is in the statement.

11.5 am

Sitting suspended.

11.17 am

On resuming—

Mr Speaker: I will suspend the House until 11.30, when we will have business questions. That will enable us to try to get a transcript of what has been said in the statement, so that all Members, whatever their opinions, can ask informed questions, as they would wish to. That is how we will play it: we will have business questions at 11.30, then we will come back to the statement. I am sorry about this; this is not the way to do good government.

11.18 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

11.30 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 12 December will include:

MONDAY 12 DECEMBER—Remaining stages of the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill, followed by a motion to approve the draft Voter Identification Regulations 2022, followed by a motion relating to the first and third reports of the Committee on Standards on a new code of conduct and a guide to the rules.

TUESDAY 13 DECEMBER—Remaining Stages of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill.

WEDNESDAY 14 DECEMBER—General debate on Ukraine, followed by an Opposition half day debate (10th allotted day, first part) in the name of the Scottish National party, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 15 DECEMBER—Debate on a motion on self-disconnection of prepayment meters, followed by a general debate on rail transport services to the communities served by the west coast main line. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 16 DECEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 19 December includes:

MONDAY 19 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Seafarers' Wages Bill [*Lords*]

TUESDAY 20 DECEMBER—Debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the Christmas recess at the conclusion of business on Tuesday 20 December and return on Monday 9 January.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I barely know where to start, but let us try with this morning's chaos, which is not the only example but the latest example of a Minister failing in their duty to provide a copy of a ministerial statement to you, Mr Speaker, and to the Opposition leads, so that they are left listening to a statement that bears no resemblance to the one to which they were expecting to respond. It happened twice last week, and I asked the Leader of the House if she would drop her colleagues a note to remind them of their duty. I am dismayed at the absolute shambles we saw this morning. It is just not on.

In relation to the quality and timeliness of ministerial responses to correspondence from MPs, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) first contacted the Home Office on behalf of his constituent on 1 October 2021, and he received a response this week, 14 months later. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) waited 17 months for her response, only to find out that more information was needed before a substantial answer could be given. The civil servants do their best—an incredible job, in fact—in tackling the backlog, but it has been created by successive

Tory Ministers. The Leader of the House has previously spoken to the permanent secretary about this, and I thank her for that, but it needs political leadership. Can she please speak with the Home Secretary about the importance of treating our constituents with respect and highlight the importance of meeting the 20-day service standard for responses?

In our successful Opposition day motion on Tuesday, we called on the Government to end the 200-year-old non-domiciled tax status, which costs taxpayers £3.2 billion a year. We would invest that in one of the biggest NHS workforce expansions in history, which is so desperately needed, but I know that the right hon. Lady seemed to side with non-doms over the NHS. What does she have to say to the 5,000 people in her constituency who faced a wait of 28 days or more to see a GP just in October, or the further 8,000 who had to wait more than two weeks? Does she not think that the great people of Portsmouth North deserve a guaranteed face-to-face appointment, which they would get with a Labour Government? Our motion called on the Government to implement Labour's plan by doubling the number of medical training places, delivering 10,000 more nursing and midwifery clinical placements and 5,000 more health visitors, and training twice the number of district nurses. Our motion was successful, so when are the Government going to get on and deliver it?

Our Humble Address calling on the Government the same day to release documents relating to the awarding of Government personal protective equipment contracts was also successful. The VIP lane for PPE is a scandal of epic proportions and has encouraged a shameful waste of taxpayers' money, and we want it back. Ministers have flushed billions down the drain on gloves, gowns and goggles that were overpriced, unusable or undelivered, and even now, the British people are picking up a daily tab of £700,000 for storage of PPE that is unfit for use. A Labour Government would get a grip on this, end the waste and provide sound management of taxpayers' money.

Meanwhile, in the Lords last week, a high turnout of Conservative peers voted to keep the VIP lanes for direct award in procurement. When the Leader of the House brings the Procurement Bill back to this House, will she at least restrict the use of VIP lanes? Given that our motion was successful, can she tell us when, how and where the documents about these contracts will be released? It is really important, and I hope for a direct answer.

I return to Government chaos on the handling of legislation and their sofa down the back of which Bills seem to be disappearing at a rate of knots. Never mind Bills not making progress—some, like the Online Safety Bill, are heading back in time and going back upstairs. We hear that others are never going to happen at all. Just yesterday, the Government dropped two more. The Education Secretary confirmed that the Schools Bill is gone. Could the Leader of the House tell us why? The Transport Secretary admitted that the revolving door of Government Ministers in his Department was not “ideal”—quite the understatement!

Later today in the Adjournment debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), the shadow Deputy Leader of the House, continues her fantastic campaign against the antisocial use of e-scooters. Despite a commitment from the Government in the

Queen's Speech this year, the Transport Secretary now says that there will almost certainly be no transport Bill in this Parliament.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): There is no transport!

Thangam Debbonaire: As my hon. Friend says, there is no transport. The sofa just keeps getting bigger and bigger. Could the Leader of the House confirm whether that is true? Are the Government planning to break yet another promise to the British people? Is there any government actually taking place?

Whether it is the NHS or procurement, schools or transport, this Government's incompetence and chaos know no bounds. Their inability to govern is quite literally bringing this country to a grinding halt. Nothing is working, and it is on them—ripping apart public services and crashing the economy, and working people are paying the price. The voters deserve a proper say on the country's future and a Labour Government.

Penny Mordaunt: May I start by wishing everyone a happy Christmas Jumper Day and wishing England good luck on Saturday? I also wish Godspeed to the four Royal Navy submariners of HMS Audacious as they set off to row unsupported the 3,000 miles across the Atlantic to promote and fundraise for resilience, good mental health and wellbeing. I hope the whole House will wish them well.

I would like to give my apologies to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), the House and you, Mr Speaker, for what happened this morning. I know that everyone is pulling together to ensure that a full statement can be made available to the Opposition and all Members of this House. I will certainly be following that up, as you would expect me to, Mr Speaker.

On correspondence, I agree with the hon. Lady: all Departments should be meeting those targets and hoping to exceed them. We are doing a lot of work with correspondence teams and parliamentary Clerks, as well as advisers, to ensure that this is in a better place. If anyone has correspondence that is outstanding, please flag it with my office and we will follow it up.

The hon. Lady mentions health and my constituency in particular. I have to tell her that in 2010, when I came into Parliament, my hospital was falling to bits and we had the worst MRSA rates in the country. Those things are vastly improved. We do not have to speculate as to what a Labour Government would do for the NHS; we have only to look at Wales to see that in action. One in 20 people are on a waiting list in England; one in four are in Wales. I am happy to rest on our record versus Labour's.

The hon. Lady raises the serious matter of PPE contracts. I remind her that I spent a large part of the first year of the pandemic on the telephone to all hon. Members. She will know that, because she was a diligent frequent flier on those 10 am calls. I answered questions from every hon. Member who needed assistance, such as in getting PPE for their hospitals. I fielded questions and concerns, and raised matters with every Government Department on their behalf, particularly for the 2019 intake who had recently come into the House.

In my experience, hon. Members on both sides of the House flagged many companies that changed production lines to help to produce infection-control items, supplied

[Penny Mordaunt]

those items at cost or donated them, or opened up unused factory space at their own cost to help the national effort. Those organisations that pulled together and did their bit to help us to get through that dreadful pandemic represent the bulk of British industry. It is important to say that because—God forbid—if we are ever in that situation again, we need such firms to step up and help us, so it is important not to fold them in with companies that were, frankly, profiteering and whose practices are under question.

The hon. Lady knows that investigations are going on, including fraud investigations, with regard to certain cases, as well as mediation and potential litigation, and that particular documentation cannot be released until those investigations are concluded. She will also know the Government's stance on this from many debates in this place, including the Opposition day debate that was held the other day.

I question the hon. Lady's characterisation of the Government. This week alone, we have heard announcements on £500 million for schools and colleges in England to spend on energy efficiency upgrades; an additional £50 million top-up to the homelessness prevention grant, which brings the total grant to £366 million; the launch of our first helpline for victims of rape and sexual abuse; the new elective recovery taskforce; gas imports; and new freeports being set up, as well as the Royal Assent to four Bills. Further business will be announced in the usual way.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Following business questions, we will return to the issue of planning in Cumbria. The only item in the future business read out by the Leader of the House is about rail transport services to the communities served by the west coast main line. There is no debate scheduled—obviously it could not be in advance—on whether it is right or wrong to give permission to the coal mine. In addition to the questions and answers today, however, can the Opposition and the Government get together to have a proper debate on whether we go on following planning guidelines, as we seem to have done in this case, or overturn them and go on importing coking coal?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He will know that the next Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions are on 9 January, but obviously there is a more immediate way for him to put his question to the Secretary of State, who I think will be back in the Chamber shortly. I will certainly ensure that he has heard my hon. Friend's comments, if he cannot stay for the statement.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a little frustrating that the procedures of this place mean that I have to wait a week before I can respond to comments that the Leader of the House makes in business questions, but the motto of Leith in my constituency is "Persevere!", so persevere I shall.

The Leader of the House likes to play the schoolmarm, but last week's efforts deserved 100 lines on context. For example, she said that Scotland has the worst A&E

waiting times on record while failing to mention that England's A&E waiting times are the worst on record too and that Scotland's are nevertheless considerably better than England's. Some context, as I am sure any schoolmarm would agree, is important.

I recognise that attack is the best form of defence, but I wonder if the time has come for the Government to install the independent House of Commons fact-checking service that some have called for—a real one, not the Conservative pretendy one we saw in 2019—with instant replay, an adjudication function, a claxon and perhaps a "Three strikes and you're out" feature.

It has been such an exciting week, and not just for those of us in the Westminster SNP group. The Government are in a shambles again, with further revelations about Baroness Mone, VIP lanes and PPE contracts, and the release of Labour's "Gordy Broon" commission report, which seems only to have left people wondering why Labour thinks it can impose its constitutional proposals on Scotland because of a democratic mandate it hopes to win at the next election but it will not recognise the democratic mandate for an independence referendum won by the Scottish Government at several elections. He is trying to save his precious Union, with assortments from his big bag of vows, so could the Government perhaps humour an old ex-Prime Minister and allow a debate on the devolution of powers to the so-called extremities—extremities being, of course, everywhere that is not London? Given the mood of current red-wallers on the Conservative Back Benches, it might prove a popular move.

Speaking of popular moves, lastly, I notice that the Leader of the House has been sharing her weekly contributions on the SNP on social media, but if she ever looks below the line, she will notice that the vast majority of comments are from people in Scotland absolutely infuriated by her remarks. And guess what? Just yesterday, a major Scottish poll told us that 56% of our people support independence, and that support for the Tories has crashed to a mere 14%, so I say to her: keep those media clips coming! Her unwitting but welcome embrace of the cause of independence for Scotland will not be forgotten.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady mentions the report produced by the former Prime Minister, and although I welcome debate, I think they are flawed ideas. I shall not call him yesterday's man, but Labour is increasingly looking like yesterday's party.

The hon. Lady has painted me as a schoolmarm this week, so I shall role play and give an arithmetic lesson. The Scottish Government have complained this week that they are having to make £1 billion of cuts, despite the fact that they have 26% more funding per head than England, and I just have some suggestions about how she might find that. She might cancel the £20 million on a referendum that is not happening, or the £9 million on the eight embassies they run. She could look at the £300 million they have spent so far on two ferries, which are five years late and £150 million over budget, or at the £52.4 million on the collapsed BiFab company or the £5 million on climate change reparations. She could look at the nearly £600 million they spent to bail out Sanjeev Gupta's smelting business, or the half a million pounds wasted on a publicly owned energy company that never happened. That adds up to over £1 billion,

but instead the Scottish National party is going to have to cut frontline services and capital projects to balance the Government's books. As the Auditor General has pointed out this week, he has lifted the veil on the scale of the SNP's financial incompetence. I think the people of Scotland deserve better than that, and that is why I will be putting this clip out later.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Can I ask my right hon. Friend why there is nothing in her statement about the disruption to lives and livelihoods being caused by strikes over the next month? We have heard rumours that the Government are going to bring in emergency legislation, but nothing in her statement refers to that, and we are now going to have a recess for about a month. Is she expecting these strikes to disrupt lives with impunity up until 9 January 2023, and what is going to happen after that? Is it not time that the Government got a grip on this?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that these strikes, particularly on transport, are going to be incredibly disruptive for people, especially those who do not have an alternative to using public transport. It is particularly difficult for people who may not be able to see each other over the Christmas period, when families want to come together. The minimum services legislation has already been introduced, but he will know that the Prime Minister is giving this his attention as a priority and is looking at what further things we can do to ensure that the public can rely on basic levels of service across these very important areas.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and announcing the Backbench Business Committee business for Thursday 15 December and Tuesday 20 December. Will the Leader of the House, via the usual channels, indicate whether the Backbench Business Committee will be allocated any time in the first week back after the recess, so that we can notify applicants in an appropriate amount of time for them to prepare?

Over the last few weeks I have received several items of correspondence from the Home Office—often containing responses to four, five or six different cases—which almost invariably are holding responses on cases that have often been registered with it many months ago. Can the Home Office give MPs' inquiries timely, full and complete responses, rather than endless holding responses on cases that date back many months?

Penny Mordaunt: I will certainly give the hon. Gentleman the heads-up on Backbench Business Committee time; as he knows, I have been trying to give hon. Members time to prepare for potential debates, and I will carry on doing that.

The hon. Gentleman refers to Home Office responses and I know that is a concern for many Members. It offers a one-to-one service where Members can sit down with a case officer and work through their cases, but there is also the option to have individual letters; I have explained to the Home Office the admin burden on

Members from not receiving individual letters. I have heard from some Members that they have had difficulty securing one of the surgeries offered by the Home Office, and I would be happy, through my office, to facilitate.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time in this place for a debate on the consumer protections to householders when builders either go bust or simply disappear midway through a building project? I have a constituent who I would like to say has been left high and dry, but unfortunately he has been left low and cold and wet because a builder has simply not completed the work and has disappeared into thin air. A county court judgment cost him £2,200 to get but at no point was there any health warning that he may never see the money, so he feels he has paid into the court system as well as paying well over £20,000 to a builder, and he does not feel there is any consumer protection for him whatsoever.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this and the work she has done on the issue: she has been raising this matter on behalf of her constituent and I am sorry about the situation they are in. My right hon. Friend will know that the next Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions is on 9 January and I suggest she start by raising that issue there. As that is some time away, I will write to the Department on her and her constituent's behalf and ask that the matter be addressed urgently.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Can we find time for a debate on what is happening at the Shelter charity? Many Members and constituents will be unaware that the Shelter management has imposed a pay cut on its workforce, which has produced industrial action. A debate may help put pressure on the trustees to recognise that they have significant reserves and could pay their staff an inflation-proofing wage increase. The staff are incredibly dedicated but ironically some of them are now struggling to secure a roof over their heads as a result of successive pay cuts in recent years.

Penny Mordaunt: That sounds like a topic for a Backbench Business Committee debate and the right hon. Gentleman will know how to apply for that. Charities are of course focused on putting as much money as they can into the services they provide, but what has happened at Shelter is very concerning, particularly at this time of year when we need all its staff to be doing what they want to do, which is help those who are most vulnerable.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Although the charity lottery sales limit for society lotteries was increased in March 2020, further reform is required to end the farcical situation whereby organisations such as the People's Postcode Lottery are forced to cut ticket prices to comply with the current restrictions, which greatly reduces the amount of funds available to be donated to good causes in our constituencies. I am sure that all hon. Members know of some good causes that have benefited from such lotteries. Will my right hon. Friend bring forward a debate in Government time to discuss wider reforms of sales limits so that society lotteries can remain attractive to players while maximising the benefit to good causes in our constituencies?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises an important matter that would be the basis of a good debate, and she will know how to apply for one. Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions are on 26 January. As that is a little way off, I shall write to the Department on her behalf and raise those questions.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I recently met the Bath Philharmonia, an orchestra who work closely with young carers and who have been campaigning for a long time about the barriers preventing young people from engaging with music. Music is such a powerful tool that can be so healing for everybody, and particularly for young carers. Will the Government mention young carers in their plan for music education, and can we have a statement about that? So far, young carers are completely left out of that plan.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that. It sounds like a wonderful organisation and, having been a young carer myself, I know how healing it is, as she says, to be able to take part in the arts. I would certainly want that experience to be available to everyone in that situation. I will write to the Department on her behalf and ask it to contact her office to ensure that it has a comprehensive view.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): A reception is taking place in the House today for Team UK, who are back from the WorldSkills competition, where they obtained a top 10 place in the medals table. The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) is doing the House a service by hosting the reception. Could we have a debate to consider the importance of skills programmes and use that as an opportunity to highlight the range of skills programmes available as well as to explore where gaps may lie for the industries of the future?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that and thank all hon. Members who have facilitated and will be attending the reception later today. He is absolutely right that it is incredibly important that we focus on skills. We are also encouraging young people and giving them confidence, and the event will certainly do that.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Earlier this week, I met representatives of Greater Manchester Fire Brigades Union here in the Palace of Westminster. They are currently balloting for industrial action after an inadequate pay offer of 5% was put forward, which is well below inflation and underfunded, coming out of existing fire and rescue budgets. No firefighter wants to take that course of action, but after 11,000 job losses, including 631 full-time firefighter roles in Greater Manchester since 2010, and a pay offer that will impact local services, what are they meant to do? As such, will the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on increasing firefighter pay and properly investing in fire and rescue services across the country?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising those points. It is deeply regrettable that any sector feels the need to go on strike, even though there will be minimum services and, of course, it is rightly the policy of the union that if there is a major incident, people will come in and attend that. I suggest that he raises that at the next Home Office questions on 19 December.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): We have many things to be proud of in Scunthorpe, and we are very proud of Scunthorpe litter pickers and others like them who give up their free time to go out and collect litter to keep our area clean. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking them for the work that they do in the community? Will she support a debate in Government time on how to get rid of the scourge of littering, so that they no longer need to do that for us?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to thank Scunthorpe litter pickers. It sounds like they do an amazing job. Her question is timely, as Monday was International Volunteer Day. I think the last debate we held on this issue was round about May, so it is perhaps time for one and she knows how to apply.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Last week, the Leader of the House used the trope about how powerful the Scottish Parliament is, but the reality is that it is not even the most powerful devolved Parliament in the United Kingdom. Energy except for nuclear, pensions and even the Union are devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. If those powers can be devolved to Northern Ireland, why not Scotland?

Penny Mordaunt: The SNP has done its best not to take up the powers given to it. I remember, at the Department for Work and Pensions, my frustration when it had powers to act on welfare. It would rather criticise the Westminster Government than take the responsibility and power offered to it, and actually do its own thing. I wonder why that is. It is because the SNP wants power, but it does not want to be held responsible or accountable for delivering services. I am afraid the people of Scotland are finding it out on that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Very sadly, the number of rough sleepers has increased once again and people are being forced to sleep rough on our streets. The cold weather is once again upon us and organisations across the country, including Shelter, Crisis and others, will be opening shelters to accommodate people during the cold weather. During the pandemic, dormitory-style accommodation was quite rightly outlawed, but that meant separate rooms had to be provided for people who were rough sleeping. At the moment, I understand that no guidance is being given by the Department on what should happen now. May we therefore have a statement from the relevant Secretary of State on what advice is being given to the charities and organisations that give wonderful support to people who are forced to sleep rough?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. In the last few years, in part because of what happened during the pandemic, we have been able to halve rough sleeper numbers. There is, I understand, advice on gov.uk relating to shelters and other facilities. I think there is advice on Shelter's website, too. However, I shall write to the relevant Department and make sure that advice is up to date and that all such organisations are aware of it.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to the announcement of the debate on Monday on the code of conduct, there have been 50 MPs in the Chamber since

the Business statement started. If all 50 of us were taken away for a plush weekend in a hotel, taken to the Brit Awards together, or invited by the Qatari Government to a football match later this week, 47 of us would have to register that in the House and declare it publicly within 28 days, along with all the details. According to the motion from the Leader of the House for Monday, however, three of us would not have to do that—the three who have been sitting on the Treasury Front Bench. The 1922 Committee, the Committee on Standards, the Institute for Government and all the transparency bodies in the country have called for us to end that exemption so that all MPs are treated identically. Would that not make far more sense?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman is being slightly unfair. In addition to the motion we are bringing forward on House business, he will know, because I have spoken to him on several occasions, that the Government are also planning to do something on ministerial interests. *[Interruption.]* We can talk about it now, but we have a debate on Monday so I might leave it till then. What is important is the principle he sets out: that there should be parity on such matters. What I do not think is reasonable is that should he become a Minister—I sincerely hope that is never the case—his parliamentary resources would have to be used to do things that are Whitehall's responsibility. I am bringing forward a practical solution. On the principle, there should be parity both in terms of transparency and on timetable.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Local plans are the foundation of our planning system. In Barton-upon-Humber in my constituency, a major housing development is proposed, but North Lincolnshire Council has rejected it because it is not in the local plan. Despite that, the applicant is appealing. Bearing in mind the importance of local plans to our system, it is surely quite wrong that the applicant should be able to appeal when the local plan specifically states that this land is not for residential development. Can we have a debate on the importance of local plans and of local decision making in planning?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. If he is very clever, he may be able to shoehorn that into the statement that follows business questions. Failing that, he can raise it on 9 January at the next Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Leader of the House aware that the cold winter is with us—I think she must be, because this is the first day of winter when people have had to scrape their car to drive anywhere? Can we have a debate on what I call the “nosy neighbour scheme”, which I would like all Members to adopt? I am frightened that little children will go to bed this winter with no food in their tummy and no heat in their home. Our nosy neighbour scheme in Huddersfield encourages people to spot whether a child is in trouble, whether an elderly person is neglected or whether a family is struggling. We would, of course, like more resources for local authorities to back such schemes, but will the Leader of the House endorse that nosy neighbour scheme of the very best kind?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that, and the scheme that he mentions sounds very good. Organisations such as the British Red Cross

run similar schemes, which might involve young children who are walking to school checking in on older neighbours, and that is incredibly important. One benefit that came out of the awful pandemic was that neighbours started to take a greater interest in how people were in their local street. We should hold on to that, so I thank him for raising awareness of that scheme.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): The latest round of rail strikes announced by the RMT will ruin Christmas for many people in Southend West. From our marvellous pantomime “Snow White” at the Cliffs Pavilion to our Age Concern Christmas party, even to our Music Man Project Christmas party, all will suffer as a result of the strikes. Please can we have a debate in Government time on minimum rail service requirements, and will my right hon. Friend condemn the Grinches at the RMT and help my constituents to get their Christmas back on track?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. As she will know, we have introduced the Transport Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill, and the Prime Minister is looking at what more he can do on that front. It is incredibly important not only to the Music Man Project, but to the pantomime season in Southend, that we enable people to get there and spend money in local shops.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): Can we have a debate on the future of the House of Lords, given that the former Prime Minister and the Lord Speaker have made significant interventions this week? Perhaps it would be an idea if those of us who were actually elected to Parliament got a chance to have our say.

Penny Mordaunt: That would be an excellent topic for a debate, and the Backbench Business Committee would probably be a good route to that. The hon. Gentleman can raise matters relating to the House of Lords and other subjects at Cabinet Office questions. Given that that is some time off, I will write to the constitution team and make sure that it has heard his request.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): A group of Stroud GPs has recently raised with me the issues of medicine waste and sustainability in primary care. I am learning not only that we need big changes, but that small things will save taxpayers' money and protect the environment. Do hon. Members know that if patients find an error when they check their prescriptions in the surgery building, the medicine can be saved, but that if they step foot outside and find an error when they check, the medicine has to be destroyed? It is completely bonkers to have that waste. I am hoping for a Gloucestershire-led NHS public awareness campaign, but will my right hon. Friend support a debate in Government time to raise awareness about that key issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the matter. It would certainly make a good topic for a Westminster Hall debate, and she knows how to apply for one. If people knew about these simple things, they would certainly do them, so the message today is, “Check your meds before leaving the pharmacy, to save the NHS money.”

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I went along yesterday to Guide Dogs Open Doors event in this House, where I was quite shocked to find out that 73% of guide dog users have experienced an access refusal in the past 12 months. They told me that using guide dogs in taxis has been less of a problem since it was brought under the criminal law, but there is still a great problem with other businesses, including in retail. Could we have a debate about making access refusals to people with guide dogs subject to the criminal law for all businesses as it is for taxis?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure that it was an excellent event. I was slightly nervous when I saw in the schedule that it was next door to a Cats Protection event—I thought that it could go terribly wrong very quickly. I will certainly raise the matter with the relevant Department. From transport to restaurants and other businesses or places of work, it is vital that everyone has access, including people with support animals.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The Office for National Statistics estimates that the net migration figure has reached more than 500,000 in the past year. The figure includes our resettlement of Afghans, the arrival of Hong Kong nationals and the temporary resettlement of Ukrainians, all of which demonstrate our hospitality as a country, but we must look at the broader picture. Since 1997, net migration has increased by a staggering amount and has had a significant impact on our public services and housing demand. Will the Leader of the House find time for a full debate in Government time on immigration, on its impact on society more generally and on how we can succeed in delivering the Government's stated aim of reducing it to 100,000 per year?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising a matter of huge concern to many Members across the House. I shall certainly ask the Home Office whether it is planning such a debate. May I also flag up Home Office questions on 19 December, at which my hon. Friend may wish to raise the matter directly with the Home Secretary?

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): The Supreme Court's recent findings on a matter of domestic law have been criticised by academics and others for straying into international legislation on the matter of self-determination. Last week, I tabled early-day motion 633 on the St Andrew's day declaration, which was published on St Andrew's day and which asserts the right of the sovereign people of Scotland to freely determine their political, cultural, economic and social status according to international resolutions and law.

[That this House welcomes and endorses the St Andrew's Day Declaration of 30 November 2022 which states that we the people, elected members and civic organisations of Scotland assert that our nation has the right of self-determination to freely determine our political status and to freely pursue our economic, social and cultural development, mindful of the Scottish constitutional tradition of the sovereignty of the people, we will democratically challenge any authority or government which seeks to deny us that right.]

In Westminster Hall, I pressed for clarity on specific points, but I did not get an answer. Continued support for independence is increasing; among young people, it

is up to 72%. The Government's policy of continuing to refuse and deny democracy is not working. Is it not time that they brought forward a debate to get into the substantive political issues, which the Supreme Court recognised were separate from its legal ruling on the current devolution settlement, so that we can begin to progress this very important matter for the Scottish people?

Penny Mordaunt: Look, my understanding is that the Scottish National party's policy is that it accepts the Supreme Court ruling.

Neale Hanvey: I am not a Scottish National party Member.

Penny Mordaunt: It says that it respects democracy. It should stop unpicking the Supreme Court ruling while claiming that it supports it. It should also think long and hard about whether democrats should adhere to the result of a referendum.

Neale Hanvey: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Penny Mordaunt: With regard to the hon. Gentleman's other point, if there were no route to having a referendum, we would not have had one.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I note that the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) is trying to raise a point of order to the effect that he is not a Scottish National party Member. I think that is recognised, but it is not a point of order and I am not sure that it is relevant. He asked a question, he got an answer—the rest is irrelevant.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): My constituent Stephen Harvey, a veteran, was due to spend his 100th birthday trapped on an acute cardiac ward, despite having been fit for discharge three months earlier. He has been failed by the Welsh Labour Government's health and social care system, but thankfully, because of funding facilitated by my office, Wrexham Maelor Hospital is now Veteran Aware-accredited and has a dedicated healthcare co-ordinator in place. A birthday bash was thrown and we are now helping to facilitate a discharge, with his family looking to England for a suitable care placement. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Wrexham Maelor Hospital's veterans team on their great work?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend and her hospital on raising awareness of the issues that veterans face and on getting this gallant gentleman the care plan that he needs. We are facing a very difficult situation with regard to how Welsh Labour is running the health service, but everything we can do to ensure that patients are getting the care they need, including out in the community, is very welcome, so I thank my hon. Friend.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On Monday, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, who I see is in his place, made a significant announcement about the future of short-term holiday lets. He is bringing in a registration scheme that will appease the industry and landlords, but it will not help our residents. Could we have an urgent statement

on the matter so that we can scrutinise the proposals and ensure that the voice of residents is also heard in the debate?

Penny Mordaunt: The Secretary of State's presence on the Front Bench has saved me a stamp, as he will have heard the hon. Lady's request.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): We have two outstanding Outwood academies in Worksop, and they are oversubscribed as a result. They are a testament to this Government's policies, but we also have an outstanding independent school, Worksop College, which does excellent partnership work with many local schools. Many parents are concerned about Labour's policy to add 20% VAT on fees, effectively mounting an attack on aspiration. Pupils leaving the independent sector will need places in state education, depriving more children of the opportunity to go to a local school. The Independent Schools Council's report suggests that the policy, which Labour claims would raise £1.7 billion, would actually lose £400 million. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the benefits of independent schools to wider society?

Penny Mordaunt: The fact that the issue is being debated and that its profile has been raised as a result of Labour party policy is an opportunity for the independent sector. Some schools do a huge amount for other schools and for their community—this is their opportunity to talk about it.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): At the last Justice questions, the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), admitted that

“convictions based on joint enterprise appear from some studies...disproportionately”—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2022; Vol. 723, c. 135]

to affect certain communities and minority groups. That admission was subsequently picked up and reported on by *The New York Times*. Does the Leader of the House share concerns about how the offence of joint enterprise in UK law is being applied? Can we have a debate on whether it could potentially be considered a miscarriage of justice in future appeals?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue. He knows that the next Justice questions are on 10 January. I encourage him to raise the matter directly with the Lord Chancellor then.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate on the Justice Committee's recent report, “IPP sentences”? Some 3,000 people are potentially trapped in prison indefinitely, even though their index offence did not warrant a live term and even though indeterminate sentences for public protection were abolished in 2012. Resentencing is the appropriate course, because we face the real potential risk that somebody with a two-year term could spend the rest of their life in prison.

Penny Mordaunt: That is an important point, and I thank my hon. Friend, who is a member of the Justice Committee, for raising it. The Government are considering the recommendations in the Committee's recent report and will respond shortly. I expect Justice questions on 10 January to be extremely well attended.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Abdullah Ibhais was jailed in Qatar for whistleblowing and taking part in an ITV documentary about the mistreatment of migrant workers. Shockingly, he was tortured on the eve of the World cup kick-off, and FIFA, disgracefully, has turned its back on his plight. Meanwhile, there is news of yet another migrant worker dying in the last 24 hours. Abdullah's family are calling for the United Nations working group on arbitrary detention to intervene in his case. May we have a debate so that Members in all parts of the House can raise their concerns about his situation, and also condemn FIFA, not just for not raising his case but for not contributing to a fund to compensate the families of people who have died working on projects relating to the World cup, and those who have been injured?

Penny Mordaunt: The next Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions will be on 13 December, and I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to take up that case then. However, I will also write to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on his behalf, as I am sure that many Members will want an opportunity to talk about the tournament, FIFA and its future.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): During Home Office questions on 14 November, I raised a case that my office and I have been dealing with for over a year. The Immigration Minister committed himself to looking into it, but despite my team following this up more than once, we have heard nothing since his office's initial contact. Will the Leader of the House please remind her colleague about this case, so that my constituent can be reassured that it is being looked into as a matter of urgency?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear that that has been the hon. Lady's experience. If she passes the details to me, I shall make sure that someone from the Home Office is in touch with her office this afternoon.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Postal workers in my constituency and across the country do an essential job at the heart of our communities—they even worked through the pandemic to keep people connected—but they are threatened with worsening pay and conditions, and now their jobs are threatened by Royal Mail, which wants to cut 10,000 positions. May we have a debate on why and how the Government can allow Royal Mail to turn its back on hard-working staff during a cost of living crisis? The position is very unsatisfactory, and the Government really must do more to support postal workers in our country.

Penny Mordaunt: There will clearly be disruption as a result of the planned industrial action, and therefore, as Members will know, the last posting dates before Christmas have been brought forward. It is regrettable that this action is taking place, and I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise these matters at the next appropriate Question Time.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): The cost of living crisis is hitting all our communities hard, none more than my own in Pontypridd. Meanwhile, the Government have wasted of billions of taxpayers' money

[Alex Davies-Jones]

on unusable PPE, and are refusing to produce the documentation highlighting this corruption. I recognise that, as the Leader of the House has said, there are ongoing fraud cases relating to this matter, but may I press her further on when, how and in what format the documents will be published, given that the Humble Address proposed by the Labour party was passed earlier this week?

Penny Mordaunt: I refer the hon. Lady to what I said at the beginning of my response to the shadow Leader of the House. Obviously some companies are currently being investigated, but we have to see this in context: the vast majority of businesses—whether they were providing PPE on commercial terms, donating, or providing services or PPE at cost—did an incredible job in very difficult circumstances. If we are ever in this position again, we will want businesses to have the necessary confidence, and the message we should be sending from the House is that we want them to step up and help in the national effort.

As for the specifics, I will certainly make the Secretary of State aware that the House wants a clearer timeline, but the short answer is that those documents will be released as soon as is legally possible, which was our stance during the debate on this topic earlier in the week.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As the right hon. Lady will know, I have a great deal of respect for her. When she held the post of Paymaster General, she commissioned a review by Sir Robert Francis KC on a compensation framework for those infected and affected by the contaminated blood scandal. That report was given to the Government in March. The House was told repeatedly that we would see a Government response and an oral statement would be made, but neither has been forthcoming despite months of waiting. Can the Leader of the House use her good offices to ensure that we are given that statement next week, before we rise for the Christmas recess?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the right hon. Lady; the feeling is entirely mutual. I also thank her for her tremendous work with the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood to ensure that justice is done for those infected and those affected by this terrible situation. As she knows, the compensation study was designed to ensure that the Government were on the front foot when the wider inquiry was concluded, and also, as has been suggested, to ensure that interim payments could be made to those in particular hardship. I will certainly write to the Cabinet Office today to ensure that the hon. Lady's request has been heard, and I will keep her up to date with what is happening.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Support for Scottish independence is now at 56%. In almost all age groups a majority would vote “yes”, and a majority supports independence in every region of Scotland. Like everyone else in the House, I am well aware of the Leader of the House's views on Scottish independence, so she need not reiterate them now, but will she make a statement to the House setting out what she thinks are the reasons for that continued and rising support?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady's claim is not borne out when we look at who people vote for across Scotland. The Scottish National party is now a single-issue party. It is not gripping the issues affecting people in Scotland, and there is growing disquiet about that. This week we heard from the Auditor General on the subject of financial mismanagement; there are hundreds of millions of pounds relating to the ferry contracts that he cannot even account for. As we come out of the pandemic and we want our public services to be able to recover, and that should be the focus of the Scottish nationalist Government.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): The Leader of the House may know that yesterday, during discussions about biodiversity in Canada, the Secretary-General of the United Nations said that humanity was in danger of becoming a “weapon of mass extinction”. In my constituency there is proposal for a major incursion into the green belt that would threaten 27 separate native species, including some ancient woodland. Will she find time to reaffirm the Government's commitment to green belt land and biodiversity, and may we have a debate on this essential subject, which should provide the background for any planning decisions for the future?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will have heard the Prime Minister express his commitment to the green belt during Prime Minister's questions this week, and the 2030 target to halt species decline is one of the planks of the Government's environmental strategy. I am sure that a debate on that strategy and its success to date would be popular, and the hon. Gentleman will know how to apply for one.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): We have heard today that the final stages of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will be discussed on Tuesday, but Scotland wants to level out. We do not want any more Tory levelling up; we want to make our own future. As the dust settles on the Supreme Court decision that has triggered a shocking rise in support for independence to 56%, can we have a debate in Government time on the central elements of Scottish independence, not least of which would be the Leader of the House's views on why Scotland has elected an SNP Government at four elections in a row and why the vast majority of Scottish MPs—two thirds—at three elections in a row have been either SNP Members or independence-supporting? Can we have a debate on this so we can find out what she thinks about the mindset of the Scottish people? Are they confused in their pursuit of independence? Should they just know better and listen to her?

Penny Mordaunt: I do not think the Scottish people are confused; I think the Scottish National party is confused. If it is not keen on levelling up, why is it applying for levelling-up funding from the UK Government?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Yesterday, the Taliban introduced public executions at a grotesque, evil ceremony in a sports stadium in Afghanistan. This came only a few weeks after the introduction of a harsh interpretation of sharia law that is increasing pressure on women, on religious minorities and on human rights defenders. Does the Leader of the House agree that more needs to be done to protect these vulnerable groups in Afghanistan?

She is always very helpful, so may I ask for a ministerial statement on this increasingly worrying trend, which illustrates that Afghanistan is guilty of some of the world's worst human rights abuses and persecutions of ethnic and religious minorities?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this extremely sad situation. I am sure many Members will have seen the escalation in public punishment beatings and executions, with particularly horrific examples levelled against women. The House has deep ties with Afghanistan and this will be of immense concern to many Members. I will write to the Foreign Secretary to make sure he hears what the hon. Gentleman has said today. He can also raise it directly with the Foreign Secretary on 13 December.

Called-in Planning Decision: West Cumbria

12.31 pm

Mr Speaker: In a moment, we will resume proceedings on the statement started earlier by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Before we do so, I put on record my dismay that the Government have failed to follow not just the clear, long-established conventions of the House but their own rules. The "Ministerial Code" says:

"A copy of the text of an oral statement should usually be shown to the Opposition shortly before it is made. For this purpose, 15 copies of the statement and associated documents should be sent to the Chief Whip's Office at least 45 minutes before the statement is to be made. At the same time, a copy of the final text of an oral statement should in all cases be sent in advance to the Speaker."

The key point here is "final text". It is not acceptable to provide a brief precis of a statement that is then significantly expanded by the Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box, as this means the Opposition have no meaningful advance notice and—this is my main concern—that Members do not have the detail they need in written form so they can properly ask questions of the Minister.

This situation is simply not acceptable and has caused the House very serious inconvenience, and it must not happen again. I have decided to allow the proceedings on the statement to continue, for Members to question the Secretary of State. Given the exceptional nature of this morning's events, I will call Members who were not present when the Secretary of State delivered his initial statement but who are present now.

I am very grateful to *Hansard* for quickly producing a transcript of the Secretary of State's statement, but I emphasise that it should not have to be expected to do so.

I now call the shadow Secretary of State.

12.33 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I have one question for the Secretary of State: what on earth is he thinking? The decision to greenlight the reopening of the Woodhouse colliery is bad policy and bad politics. It is the latest in a string of absurd decisions from a Government in chaos, causing chaos in this Chamber and out there in the country. They are in office but not in power.

This mine will produce coking coal used for steel, not for electricity generation. So, as the Secretary of State has had to admit today, the claim it helps to safeguard our energy security is nonsense, but it gets worse. The two big steel producers, Tata and British Steel, are phasing out this coal in favour of lower-carbon production methods. By the mid-2030s, at best, the UK will use less than 10% of the mine's output. Across the world, demand for coking coal is projected to fall off a cliff, by 88%, by 2050.

People in Cumbria deserve a long-term future, with lasting, well-paid jobs that power us through the next century. Instead, they are saddled with a weak, short-sighted and unambitious Government who, only two months ago, rejected a plan to bring new nuclear to Cumbria, which would have created not 500 short-term jobs but 10,000 jobs for the long term.

[Lisa Nandy]

The right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) is supposed to be the Secretary of State for Levelling Up. The Tories were once the party of conservation, and now they are the party of environmental vandalism. He can fiddle the figures all he likes, but the reality is that this mine is projected to increase emissions by 0.4 million tonnes a year, according to his own advisers. That is equivalent to putting 200,000 more cars on the road every single year.

This decision flies in the face of Britain's net zero objectives, contradicts the aims of the UK's COP26 presidency and undermines the 2019 Conservative manifesto. This is chaos. Successive Secretaries of State are contradicting each other and the Government's independent adviser on climate change condemned the decision as "indefensible" even as the Secretary of State stands here trying to defend it.

The Secretary of State told us that coal has no part to play in future power generation. He cannot even agree with himself. No leadership abroad. No leadership at home. Unable to lead even in his own party. I hope he will at least reassure the House today that this bizarre decision, which he cannot even defend, was not part of a deal to buy off Back Benchers after his U-turn earlier this week on onshore wind.

People in Britain deserve better. Right across the country, communities such as mine in Wigan and across Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cumbria are proud of our mining heritage and of the contribution we made to this country, but we want a Government who look forward and match our ambition so that, through clean energy, our young people can power us through the next century like their parents and grandparents powered us through the last. Where is the ambition? Where is the leadership? Where is the government?

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Mr Speaker, thank you for your ruling earlier. I apologise to you and to the House. No discourtesy was intended. I appreciate the importance of maintaining the courtesies of the House, particularly with regard to statements.

As I mentioned earlier, the context of this statement is a quasi-judicial process on a planning application. I always admire the rhetoric of the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), and she asks, "Where is the ambition? Where is the leadership?" I think we all know where the ambition and the leadership is: it is sitting right across from me.

The hon. Lady will have her own views on future demand for coking coal, but I fear she elides the difference between coking coal used for metallurgical purposes and coal used for energy generation purposes. The inspector's report makes it clear that coking coal is used not for energy purposes but purely for metallurgical purposes, for the manufacture of steel. Of course, we will need steel for decades to come, including in the renewables sector. How else will we ensure that we supply all the materials necessary for onshore wind and other renewable energy without using steel? If she or anybody else in the House has an answer, I and millions of scientists would love to hear it.

It is important to look at the inspector's report, as I have in detail. The inspector makes it clear on page 239, in paragraph 21.37, that in all the scenarios and forecasts presented to him there was

"continued demand for coking coal for a number of decades."

He also made it clear that, at the moment, imports of coking coal come from Australia, the USA and Russia. As I pointed out in the statement, and as the inspector makes clear, no evidence has been provided to suggest that any other metallurgical coal mine in the world aspires to be net zero in the way the Whitehaven development does. Again, the inspector makes it clear that the

"development would to some extent support the transition to a low carbon future as a consequence of the provision of a currently needed resource from a mine that aspires to be net zero."

The European Commission is clear that coking coal is a critical part of steel and that steel is necessary to the future of Europe. We recognise that the demand for this coking coal, both in the UK and in Europe, is better supplied from a net zero mine than from other alternatives. As the inspector makes clear, this decision will also be responsible for high-skilled, high-value jobs in Cumbria, alongside other jobs in the supply chain elsewhere, and that is without prejudice to the other investment that the Government are making in clean green energy sources alongside it.

The inspector's report is clear and, in responding to the questions from the hon. Member for Wigan, I urge every Member of the House to read the inspector's report in full, alongside my decision letter. Those 350 pages lay out the evidence. They present the arguments for and against the decision. The inspector, an independent planning expert, has concluded that this development should go ahead and I agree with him.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the leadership he has shown on this matter, cutting through the noise from the Opposition and implementing the planning inspector's decision, which acknowledges the ongoing need for coking coal and the lack of alternatives to it in steelmaking. My constituents and I cannot understand why today's Labour party feels the need to campaign against the UK supply chain and local jobs, and for further emissions through the importation of this necessary coking coal. Can he?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. He draws attention to the importance of paying close attention to the inspector's report. The inspector makes it clear that the industrial decarbonisation strategy, which the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy produced and which has been endorsed across the House, explicitly

"does not rule out the use of coking coal in an integrated steel making process together with CCUS as a net zero compliant option going forward".

On the basis of existing policy and the inspector's recommendation, I have made my decision. As my hon. Friend points out, others—indeed, others from other parties—may make the decision on a party political ground. The decision we have made is purely on the basis of the evidence in front of us.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The decision has been condemned by the Chair of the Climate Change Committee. Chris Stark, chief executive of the committee, retweeted that this is

"climate vandalism and economic incompetence on a scale difficult to believe".

The International Energy Agency previously stated that no further fossil fuel projects can be built if net zero is to be achievable by 2050 and OECD countries need to end use of coal by 2030, so why license this mine to 2049? Ron Deelan, a former chief executive of British Steel, called it

“a completely unnecessary step for the British Steel Industry”.

Chris McDonald, chief executive of the Materials Processing Institute research centre, previously advised that British Steel could not use this coal because it is “not of the right quality”.

The reality is that 85% of this coal is going to be exported, so talking about cancelling imports is a complete red herring. What we are doing is increasing our carbon footprint to support industry in the EU. It is illogical and we know demand for coking coal will fall, as the EU is further ahead on the development of green steel. Where is the UK progress on green steel? Coking coal is not even identified on the UK’s critical mineral strategy or in the National Security and Investment Act 2021, although it is a critical mineral for the EU. But, clearly, this mine is not needed for the UK. Given this decision, what steps are being taken to rapidly accelerate the net zero pathway, for example, by changing the Scottish carbon capture and storage cluster to track 1 status?

The Secretary of State hides behind the recommendations of the Planning Inspectorate. Why did his Government override the Planning Inspectorate on Sizewell C? This coking coal is not critical for the UK. It is going to be exported, so why has he made this decision just to appease Tory Back-Bench climate change cynics?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. He quotes a number of individuals and draws explicitly—he was good enough to acknowledge this—party political conclusions. I relied on the inspector’s report and on the evidence in front of me. As I explained in my decision letter, no evidence was provided to suggest that any other metallurgical coal mine in the world aspires to be net zero, so the proposed mine is likely to be much better placed to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions than comparative mining operations around the world. On that basis, it is entirely in keeping with our net zero commitments, and indeed with the commitment to not only jobs, but the environment, to approve the inspector’s case.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): I speak as an ex-miner and a net zero champion in this place. I remember a time when the Labour party stood shoulder to shoulder, side by side with the coalmining communities in our great country, but Labour’s treachery has taken a new twist. It has turned its back on the red wall and the coalmining communities. Does my right hon. Friend agree with the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who is not in his place, when he said in 2015, when his local Hatfield colliery was due to be closed, that we should not be importing coal for the Drax power station from places such as Russia and Colombia, and instead should be mining it on our own doorstep?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The right hon. Gentleman’s comments are on the record in *Hansard* and are a valuable contribution to this debate.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): The Secretary of State is probably aware of the statement made yesterday by the Secretary-General of the United Nations that multinational corporations are making ecosystems into “playthings of profit”. The Secretary of State has prayed in aid the inspector’s report, and I accept what the inspector has said. However, the Secretary of State provides the framework for the Planning Inspectorate, so will he not now at least say that he will review the whole of our planning framework to try to protect wildlife, ecosystems and biodiversity, as well as the green belt?

Michael Gove: Let me set aside specifically the decision here, where the inspector’s report speaks for itself—I urge the hon. Gentleman and others to read it in full. On the broader point he makes about planning policy, we are bringing forward changes to the national planning policy framework explicitly to defend the green belt, safeguard biodiversity and introduce biodiversity net gain. Those changes that we brought forward were shared in a “Dear colleague” letter that I sent to every Member of the House of Commons. They attracted widespread support from Conservative MPs, but were denounced from the Dispatch Box yesterday by the Leader of the Opposition. I have enormous affection and respect for the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) and I am grateful for his commitment to the environment. Perhaps he could have a word with the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and encourage him to take a greener approach towards planning and development overall.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I really welcome this news and the fact that the Secretary of State has found that he does agree with the views of the independent Planning Inspectorate. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) and others who have campaigned so effectively on this issue. I, for one, will sleep easier in my bed knowing that we have recovered a UK-based capability to supply an incredibly important specialist kind of coal. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government must always keep in the forefront of their mind the importance of certain industries and materials for our national resilience and our strategic capabilities? He knows that, as always, I am talking about steel.

Michael Gove: On this side of the House, we have had iron ladies, but there is no better champion of steel than my hon. Friend. Whether in Scunthorpe or Port Talbot, jobs depend on the future of our steel industry. Steel is a critical strategic component of our future economy; it will be necessary as we make the transition to net zero. In that context, following the inspector’s report and following the need for coking coal, as he points out, according to experts, for decades to come, I have agreed with the inspector and am convinced that his recommendation for this mine is right.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In recent weeks, we have had the Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change almost literally gaslighting the public by claiming that fracking and the new oil and gas licences for extraction in the North sea are green measures. Now the Secretary of State is trying to make the same claim about opening a new coalmine. He tries to claim

[Kerry McCarthy]

that this is a net zero coalmine, but will he confirm that that does not take into account the actual burning of the coal?

Michael Gove: There are two separate points and the hon. Lady is absolutely right. There is both the operation of the mine itself and the future usage of the coal. The inspector analyses both, and the recommendations that he laid out weighed with me as I made the decision.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend has been clear about the distinction between metallurgical coal and coal for power production. Colleagues have spoken about the wisdom of using domestically produced products rather than imported products, as just highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson). Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to reconfirm the Government's commitment to net zero by 2050 and the rapid phasing out of coal for power production?

Michael Gove: Yes, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. We have succeeded, in the past decade or so, in dramatically reducing our reliance on coal for energy generation. It constitutes, I think, only around 2% of the current mix in energy generation, of which renewables constitute an increasing part. As he quite rightly points out, and as I know Members across the House appreciate, the coal that is being produced is metallurgical coal, which is specifically to be used in the steel-making process.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome this common-sense and economically sound decision. It is one that will create jobs, will ensure that we do not have to import necessary coal, and, as the inspector has said, will have significant national and regional economic advantages for our economy. Does the Minister agree that, where we have indigenous resources, which this economy needs, it is economically better and more honest to use those rather than import from countries with lower environmental standards and also that might not be relied on? Does he not find it ironic that some of those who are complaining today are the first to complain about not doing enough for poor regions of this country and would be the first in line to complain if steel jobs were lost?

Michael Gove: As ever, my right hon. Friend makes his case very eloquently. He is quite right to point out that the inspector gives appropriate weight to the high-skill, high-quality jobs that will be created as a result of this development going ahead.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, you know me to be a biologist and an environmentalist—I should confess to the House that I also get called a tree hugger by certain hon. Members of this House—but does my right hon. Friend agree that it is the “net” in net zero that is the crucial thing here? We have heard today from the Opposition that this development is not green, but they are wrong. It is better to do this mining on our shores and in a responsible way. Does he agree that the north-west of England has the pride, the heritage, the skills and the future to deliver not only this coking coalmine, but the future industries of 4.0?

Michael Gove: I am tempted to say that any tree that is hugged by my hon. Friend is a very lucky tree.

On the substance of the very important point that my hon. Friend makes, yes, in order to ensure that we have a transition to net zero we do need to reduce our reliance on a variety of different materials. However, as the inspector makes clear, and as my hon. Friend quite rightly points out, the economic benefits that this development brings to the north-west are also entirely consistent with our broader environmental ambitions.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), the former President of COP, says that 85% of this coal will be exported. Is he wrong?

Michael Gove: The inspector makes it clear in his report that, by sourcing coal from this mine, there will be a beneficial effect in terms of greenhouse gas emissions.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Cumbria planning committee, after careful consideration, approved this planning application. The Secretary of State then called it in for an independent review. The independent planning inspector, after careful consideration of all the evidence, recommended approval. Given my confidence that my right hon. Friend is a rational man, does he not agree that it would be completely irrational to override the recommendations of the planning inspector and refuse this planning application, which has great benefit to the United Kingdom?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend has a matchless knowledge of the planning process. Again, I urge all colleagues to read my decision letter and also the inspector's report, which gives a full account of all the evidence that was placed before him. As I said in my statement, this planning application has given rise to strong feelings on both sides, but the inspector's report lays out a particular case and, as I read the inspector's report and saw the conclusions that he drew, so my decision letter followed. I hope that all colleagues will have the chance to read the report and make their own judgments.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): This decision makes a travesty of the word “transition”. It is a full-blown backward step to more fossil fuel in the UK. In June, the Government overturned a local planning decision not to allow drilling at Horse Hill in Surrey. Now we have mining in Cumbria. This is a trend, and as we have heard, most of the coal is for export, not for local or UK need or use. Industry needs to make a profit, hence the vast quantity that it wants to export for profit for the fossil fuel industry. If the issue is that the Government are stuck with a quasi-judicial planning decision, is it not high time for root and branch reform of the planning system to put net zero at the core of every decision, rather than bending to the fossil fuel industry?

Michael Gove: Again, I urge the hon. Lady, who I know takes environmental issue seriously, to look at the inspector's report in full. She should look, for example, at paragraph 21.127, where the inspector outlines that there will be

“some, but unquantifiable, likely reductions in GHG emissions from transportation”

as a result of domestic production. Looking at the report in full and in the round, she will see that all the environmental arguments, which she takes seriously, are rehearsed, considered and then an appropriate conclusion is made.

Entirely separate to the planning inspector's report, I would welcome her and her and party's contribution to the consultation on the national planning policy framework that we have put forward. I am sure that she will find in that a number of measures that will meet the concerns that she and others have expressed in order to safeguard our environment more effectively.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): Bassetlaw has a proud mining history. Along with many of my constituents, I praise my right hon. Friend for the leadership and the pragmatism that he has shown on this issue. There has been concern about importing our coking coal from countries with lower environmental standards than ourselves. We need metallurgical coking coal for making steel, as has already been said, but now we can mine to our high environmental standards, and, of course, also cut out the need for transportation halfway across the world. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, far from having a negative effect on our own net zero ambitions, this decision actually reinforces them?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend will know how rare it is that I quote from the European Commission approvingly. However, in the inspector's report he quotes from the European Commission and says that it recognises "the indispensable role of coking coal during the steel industry's transition to climate neutrality."

As my hon. Friend has pointed out, expertise cited by the inspector all points to the wisdom of allowing this mine to go ahead.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The world is currently meeting in Montreal for COP15 to deal with the pressing climate and nature crisis that we are facing. A common message from there is that coal should be kept in the ground. It will be incredibly difficult for the Government to convince the public at home and abroad that opening a new coalmine is dealing with that urgent climate crisis in a progressive way. His colleague, the former COP26 President, described this decision as an "own goal", so may I ask the Secretary of State whether he thinks approving a new coalmine in the middle of a climate crisis will enhance or damage Britain's reputation as a global green leader?

Michael Gove: Again, I stress the importance of looking at what the inspector says. The hon. Gentleman quite rightly points out that international partners are meeting in Montreal, alongside the UK, in order to uphold the importance of biodiversity and to help protect species. I should point out that in paragraph 21.163 of the inspector's report the inspector specifically addresses the question of biodiversity and says that he

"is satisfied that the Supplemental Undertaking"—
given by the applicant—

"would ensure that the proposed development would provide for a minimum net gain"—

in biodiversity—

"of 10% prior to the commencement of production and further net gain to be achieved on restoration."

The inspector took account of biodiversity in coming to his judgment, and so have I.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the evidence before the inquiry pointed to the fact that blast furnace-basic oxygen furnace production is likely to continue in the UK and Europe until at least 2040 and probably 2050? If we need coking coal up to 2050, what on earth are other parties in this Chamber doing arguing we should import it from Russia rather than creating 500 high-paid, high-skilled jobs in Cumbria, transforming our economy, supporting the steel industry and delivering on our levelling-up promises?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. As the inspector notes, new alternative technologies being developed will mean that reliance on coking coal can be reduced over time. However, on the evidence put in front of the inspector, there will be a need for coking coal for decades to come and it is better that it comes from a net zero metallurgical mine, of which this is the only one that the inspector is aware that exists in the world.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): This is a backwards step and hon. Friends have rightly laid out the regressive environmental impact and what that says about the Government's seriousness on net zero. My party colleagues in the Assembly used the devolved powers they had to ensure a moratorium on fracking in Northern Ireland, but there is genuine concern about the potential for this Government to make similar unwanted and damaging decisions in our region, in the absence of the protection of devolution. Can the Secretary of State confirm that any extraction decisions are for devolved Ministers in Northern Ireland, where a majority of people want to keep fossil fuels in the ground and want instead to see investment in renewables and their huge potential for green jobs?

Michael Gove: I appreciate the hon. Lady's position. If she will forgive me, I shall not be drawn into the question of Executive formation in Northern Ireland. I know everybody wants to make sure we can make progress there and I take into account the importance she rightly places on devolved decision making; that is an aspiration I share.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The Opposition have no concern over European and other countries burning lignite to power their industries and rarely distinguish between thermal and metallurgical coal. Will my right hon. Friend renew his commitment to evidence-based policymaking and the ongoing revival of British mining and manufacturing?

Michael Gove: Again, the 350-page report looks at all the evidence and the competing arguments before coming to that conclusion. I know my hon. Friend, like many colleagues, looked closely at that report before coming to his own judgment, and I urge all colleagues across this House to do so.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) talks about the ongoing revival of coal mines. Not only is this decision an act of climate vandalism, but steel industry experts say it is

[Richard Burgon]

completely unnecessary and that the British steel industry needs green investment. We know that solving the energy crisis and securing good, local, well-paid jobs across the country are important, but is not investing in renewables and the national programme of housing insulation the real way to do that?

Michael Gove: The Government are investing in renewables, and the leadership that has been shown by the UK Government and partners across the UK in the provision of offshore wind is a demonstration of that. As I pointed out, when it comes to offshore and onshore wind, steel is a critical component in the manufacture of the turbines that we rely on. If we are to continue to produce steel in future, we will need coking coal for decades to come, and the inspector concludes it is better that it comes from a mine that is net zero.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State on taking this bold decision, which will help to create hundreds of high-skilled, high-value jobs in a part of the country long forgotten by the Labour party. Does he agree that it would be foolish to leave strategic industries such as steel production reliant on materials sourced from our economic competitors, when we can source the materials we need here at home?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Again, I refer back to my decision letter, in which I acknowledge that the inspector makes the point in paragraph 21.121 that the effects of downstream emissions as a result of the extraction of this coal

“may well be considered neutral or slightly beneficial when compared with other extractive sources.”

He is referring to the foreign sources of coal that my hon. Friend refers to.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I think the Secretary of State has just admitted to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) that when he talks about net zero, he does not factor in the

use of the coal extracted. Does he not respect the expertise of the right hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), the former COP26 President? He said:

“Opening a new coal mine will not only be a backward step for UK climate action but also damage the UK’s hard-won international reputation, through our @COP26 Presidency, as a leader in the global fight against climate change”.

This is an important issue. People are really concerned about climate change. I ask the Secretary of State to think again.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making her point. Again, the inspector makes clear that, whether we use coking coal from the UK or elsewhere, there will automatically be emissions. However, taking every piece of evidence in the round, given the continued reliance upon coking coal—the inspector makes clear that that is likely for decades to come—it is better that it comes from this mine rather than from other sources abroad.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for his comprehensive and detailed statement. Can he confirm, and is he satisfied, that all steps will be taken and have been taken to protect the surrounding environment, that health and safety will also be paramount, and that local people living nearby have been closely and fully consulted?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making all those points. On one level I am sorry to keep returning to the inspector’s report, but it is important to return to it, and it deals with all those issues and more. I will use the opportunity of the hon. Gentleman’s question to say to the House and to other interested parties that of course I have sought to answer every question put to me as fully as possible, with reference to the inspector’s report, but nothing I have said in this Chamber in response to questions should be taken account of without also taking account of all the arguments in the inspector’s report and my decision letter. I am grateful to so many colleagues for taking this important issue seriously, and I urge all interested parties to read the full inspector’s report in order to understand the arguments that were put to him and that he eventually judged.

Backbench Business

Cancer Services

1.7 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Twelfth Report of the Health and Social Care Committee, Session 2021-22, Cancer services, HC 551, and the Government Response, HC 345.

I am very grateful to the Liaison Committee for selecting this topic for debate in the Chamber today. We know that one in two people in the UK will develop cancer at some point in their lives. It is no exaggeration to say that this is an issue that affects everyone in the House—indeed everyone in the country in one way or another—and it has touched my life for the worse many times, as I will talk about later. That is why the Health and Social Care Committee produced a report on cancer services earlier this year, and I pay tribute to my predecessor as Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), for his leadership in producing that work. That awful statistic is also why I have made cancer a priority as the new Chair of the Committee.

Our report found great strides had indeed been made in improving survival from cancer. Thanks to the tireless work of our scientists, researchers, doctors and nurses and others, including Ministers, over many years, more than half of people diagnosed with cancer now live for five years or more, compared with only one in three people 50 years ago.

We also heard that cancer survival in England, and indeed in the rest of the UK, continues to lag behind comparable countries around the world. The International Cancer Benchmarking Partnership explains that just under 60% of people diagnosed with bowel cancer in England, for instance, will live for five years or more, compared with 66.8% in Canada and almost 71% in Australia. The pattern is seen in many other cancer types, including lung cancer, which, of course, took our great friend James Brokenshire last year; pancreatic cancer, which took my own father, who was diagnosed in September 2019 and was dead three days after the general election that December; and ovarian cancer, which has also touched my family and so many people.

The charity Target Ovarian Cancer came to the House last month—my good friend the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on ovarian cancer, led the reception downstairs in the Churchill Room—and launched its pathfinder study, “Faster, further, and fairer”. The study notes that 4,000 women a year still lose their lives to ovarian cancer. I highly recommend that excellent report to Members.

We know that one of the biggest reasons for the survival gap—I have just quoted some comparative figures—is that the NHS tends to diagnose fewer cancers at an early stage, when cancer is, of course, much more treatable. Early diagnosis is cancer’s magic key, as has been said so many times from these Benches. NHS England has set a target of diagnosing 75% of cancers at an early stage by 2028, compared with about 54% today. We say that achieving that would make a huge difference to outcomes. I agreed that target when I was the Minister with responsibility for cancer a few years ago, and I firmly believe that it is the right target to give more

people the best possible chance of surviving their cancer. But we need to be much more ambitious and get upstream of many cancers—I will return to that point.

Last month, Dame Cally Palmer, the excellent national cancer director who also works at the Royal Marsden, told us in a special topical session of the Select Committee that she remained “cautiously optimistic” that the 75% target would be met, and told us about some great progress being made on programmes such as targeted lung screening—we have all heard about the supermarket checks—which is diagnosing lots of early-stage lung cancers in the pilot studies and is showing great promise. Dame Cally’s optimism was not, I have to say, entirely shared by many of the experts who gave evidence to our inquiry on cancer services. John Butler, a specialist in ovarian cancer, thought it was “extremely unlikely” that the 75% would be reached, and Dr Jeanette Dickson, an oncologist, said the NHS was doing “very badly” against the target. That is a worry. Regrettably, we concluded in our work that the NHS is not on track to meet the 75% target, and that judgment was shared by the Committee’s independent panel of experts, who evaluated Government progress on cancer services.

The Government said in their response to us that it was premature to say that progress towards that target is off-track, but the National Audit Office found that, so far this year, 56% of patients are being diagnosed at stages 1 or 2, which is the same proportion as when I made the target in 2019. Of course, that is below the level of improvement required to reach that three-quarters target of early diagnosis by 2028. I do not agree that it can ever be premature to call for more to be done to make progress on early diagnosis when failing to achieve the target could mean many hundreds of thousands of people missing out on early diagnosis and, of course, on a better chance of surviving their cancer and living for longer.

The Committee heard extremely powerful examples of why it is so important to make more and faster progress on diagnosing cancers earlier. In December 2020, Andrea Brady’s daughter Jess died of stage 4 adenocarcinoma at the age of just 27 years old. Before her diagnosis, Jess had been passed from pillar to post, consulting repeatedly with multiple GPs and other clinicians before her mother was finally forced to pay for a private consultation just to get Jess a diagnosis. By that point, tragically, it was too late. Jess passed away in hospital three and a half weeks after she was diagnosed.

Meeting the target of diagnosing 75% of cancers at an early stage would mean giving thousands of people a better chance of surviving their cancer, and thousands fewer families having to suffer such terrible losses. That is why we called in our report for the then promised 10-year cancer plan to kickstart progress on early diagnosis. We called for it to consider more radical proposals on how to diagnose more cancers at an early stage, and to include an associated workforce plan to reduce diagnostic bottlenecks in the system.

Good work is ongoing, and I know that the Minister will talk about it later. New research, such as the NHS-Galleri blood test trial, could be transformative. Indeed, last month our colleagues at NHS England would not be drawn on whether there is a need for a new 10-year cancer plan, as previous Governments have promised. They seemed to imply that a new plan was not needed given the focus of the long-term plan on early diagnosis.

[*Steve Brine*]

I contest that. The consultation on a new 10-year cancer plan was responded to by the sector, charities, royal colleges and many other organisations, and it has set many hares running and created great expectation about a future cancer plan. We on the Committee—I see other Committee members here—are concerned about that. We are not hung up on plans, but in my experience of being a Minister, the NHS loves a plan, the NHS needs a plan, and critically, that would allow this House to see where we are against the plan.

Achieving early diagnosis is not just about what NHS England can do from the centre. It is also about improving public awareness about the many signs and symptoms of cancer across all communities. It is about making sure that GPs have good systems in place for managing patients with possible cancers and are able, without barriers, to refer them on for tests. It is about the continuous improvement of screening programmes, and hard work—really hard work—in local areas to encourage people to come forward. Of course, one of the great promises of the new integrated care systems is to work with the cancer networks and alliances to deliver on that system of early diagnosis and prevention.

Achieving early diagnosis is also about focusing research and innovation on developing new ways of detecting cancer—especially cancers that are hard to diagnose—and ensuring that the NHS is set up to roll out new tests quickly. I referred to Galleri earlier, and mentioned upstream cancer. Next year, we will do a piece of work that I loosely call “Future cancer”. It is, of course, important that we diagnose cancers early—that is the basis of my remarks. At the moment, however, we largely diagnose cancers and treat them when they are symptomatic, and we hope to catch those symptoms and treat them early. Many cancers, but not all, are preventable, and I am interested in future cancer. Where can we get upstream of this? Where can we use the NHS’s new genomics strategy? Where can we use biomarkers to get ahead of that? That poses big moral and ethical questions to us as a society, but that is no reason not to go there or not to have that ambition.

All this is about making sure that there are enough staff and machines in the system to do even more tests and give many more people the best possible chance of being diagnosed with cancer at an early stage. The 10-year cancer plan should look again to make sure that the Government are truly pulling out all the stops to get to 75% early-stage diagnoses by 2028. I hope the Minister will confirm that the Government are still committed to doing that work.

Early diagnosis means little if there is not sufficient capacity to provide people with the right treatments at the right time. Unfortunately, the latest data suggests that there has been a decline in the NHS’s ability to provide this treatment. While the vast majority of people do still receive timely treatment following a cancer diagnosis, in September nearly 10% of people waited more than a month for their first treatment following their diagnosis, compared with less than 5% in 2019. That is more than 2,400 people having to wait more than an entire month to begin their cancer treatment—more than double the number who were waiting that long two years prior. As the former cancer director, Professor Sir Mike Richards—a giant in this area—often says, when someone is waiting for a cancer diagnosis or

treatment, it is not the 31 days that really matter, but the 31 nights. I know that people around the country will understand that.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member, the Chair of the Select Committee, on an excellent report and an excellent analysis of the problems and the way forward, but he referred to the latest cancer waiting times. It is timely that we are having this debate, because the new cancer stats have been published by NHS England today. They show that the position is worsening. In October this year, 39.7% of cancer patients waited beyond 62 days between urgent referral and cancer treatment. There is an urgency in addressing some of the issues that the Chair raises.

Steve Brine: Indeed. The reason why we had Dame Cally and Professor Peter Johnson, who is the national clinical director for cancer, into the Select Committee a couple of weeks ago is that the NHS has set itself a deadline of next spring—it was this spring—to get back to the 62-day wait. I have everything I have crossed that they can get there, but they need to make it happen. I know they are relentlessly focused on that, and the Minister is relentlessly focused on that, but we have got to help them get there.

The Committee also heard about the challenges facing surgery and radiotherapy services, which makes it rather timely that the hon. Gentleman intervened on me at that point, as I suspect he will speak about it later. Professor Pat Price, who he and I are going to meet early in the new year, is a consultant oncologist at Imperial College in London. She told us that radiotherapy services were lacking staff and machines to be able to deliver the best possible care and that services were struggling to deliver the level of activity needed to catch up with the cancer backlog. I will let the hon. Gentleman expand on that a bit later. Professor Mike Griffin, professor of surgery at Newcastle University, also highlighted workforce shortages as a significant barrier to effective cancer surgery, but he also told us about the organisation of services. Because cancer surgery is often co-located within general, acute and emergency care, it can be subject to delay because of capacity shortage, and that was a particular problem during covid in some places, but not everywhere.

My trust, Hampshire Hospitals, did a brilliant job to keep cancer surgery on track at all times by doing it offsite. I pay tribute to Alex Whitfield and her team at Hampshire Hospitals for the way they organised with Sarum Road private hospital in particular to ensure that patients continued to get their cancer treatment. Professor Griffin called for more ringfenced hubs to be developed so that cancer surgery can continue even when there are severe pressures on acute care, and I hope the Minister refers to that when she winds up.

Growing the workforce, investing over the long term in machines and IT and reorganising services to create more cancer surgery hubs are all in the Government’s gift, which is why we recommended that they consider those actions in developing the 10-year plan. Without a wider focus on removing the barriers to the NHS delivering the best possible cancer treatments, the potential gains of earlier diagnosis might not be realised. Given the number of people presenting with suspected cancer at the moment—it is good that they are presenting, and many of them will turn out not to have cancer—

if it is found that they do have it, we need to move on that. That is why treatment is the other side of the same coin.

Just as further progress on early diagnosis will depend on research and innovation to develop new tests, improving cancer treatments will require new and more advanced techniques to be developed and implemented by the NHS. We found in the Committee report that the UK is a genuine world leader in research. There are unique aspects to the NHS that make it an effective partner for research organisations. We also heard that there are significant barriers to researchers accessing the data they need for quick and equitable patient recruitment to clinical trials and for staff having the time they need to take part in research. The Government have set out several steps they are taking to improve access to data and improve flexibility for staff wanting to take part in research, and that is welcome, but research by Cancer Research UK has found that the UK's recovery from the pandemic in clinical trials continues to be outpaced by other comparable countries.

NHS England told us that supporting clinical research into cancer is not its responsibility, so it is clear that a wider effort is needed to make sure that cancer research taking place in the NHS is well supported and aligned with the priorities for cancer services. That is another reason why the plan is important.

Finally, we heard that there is significant variation in outcomes for people diagnosed with cancer, depending in part on the type of cancer they are diagnosed with, but also demographic factors. The Government told us that they would be addressing these differences through the levelling-up White Paper, but also through the health disparities White Paper, by addressing issues such as smoking and obesity, which are more prevalent in our more deprived communities.

On that, there is a story in today's press which suggests that Britain has the biggest increase in early onset diabetes in the western world. That is a huge concern. I am not suggesting that diabetes is cancer; I am saying that we have many suggested actions to reduce obesity around junk food advertising and stuff that follows on from the sugar tax. Much of that has still not been implemented. Rumours abound—there are always rumours around here—that the Government are seeking to delay junk food advertising restrictions until 2025. I hope that is wrong. I invite the Minister to respond to that when she winds up and, if not, to take that away.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Steve Brine: I give way to somebody who possibly shares that view.

Maggie Throup: I agree 100% with his concerns about the potential watering down of the much-needed anti-obesity measures. Does he agree that it is important that we reflect what the public want? The public are in agreement with banning advertising on TV for particular foods that cause obesity. If we want to keep the public on our side, surely we have to follow their wishes, as well.

Steve Brine: I think that is right. The public are clear on this. I get that there are different views across this House and that there are those who disagree with much of the work that my hon. Friend and I did in government

to push some of those measures on preventing obesity. I could agree with them, but then we would both be wrong. At the end of the day, obesity is a driver of diabetes, and obesity is a driver of certain cancers. We must take that seriously. Next year, the Select Committee will be doing a huge piece of work on prevention, and we will be returning to that. I hope that Ministers are aware of that.

The recognition of the importance of health in the levelling-up White Paper is welcome, but without specific actions to address health disparities, this agenda will be at risk, so it is vital that the Government take up the prevention agenda again to stop people developing cancer in the first place. I hope the Minister will have some good news for us on that front, and I recommend that she returns to the prevention Green Paper that we published back in 2019, which contains lots of helpful ideas in that respect.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): On that point about health disparities and levelling up, I want to draw attention to the Royal Devon University Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, which serves my constituency. The staff who work there do a fantastic job of cancer diagnosis but, given that the target for the number of people seeing a cancer specialist within two weeks is 93%, it is tragic that only fewer than 60% of people who are served by that trust see a cancer specialist within two weeks of a referral. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to level across, as well as level up, and think about health disparities across the country?

Steve Brine: Yes, of course. I hate the term, but this should not be a postcode lottery. We do have integrated care systems and cancer networks, and good, strong, experienced MPs should be driving those local health economies to ensure that they level themselves up and make use of what is there in the system to deliver as well for their population as other parts of the country do. There could be a lot more sharing among us of how we use that ability as Members of Parliament to drive our systems. I do it in my area, and I am sure the hon. Member does it in his. I thank him for his intervention.

There are issues of variation affecting cancer specifically, such as proper screening uptake among certain groups, lower referral rates for some cancers and in certain areas, and higher rates of less survivable cancers among more deprived groups. We called for NHS England and the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities to produce an action plan for addressing disparities in cancer and for the much talked about 10-year cancer plan to include a specific action schedule for rarer and less survivable cancers. That remains, for us, a vital aspect of improving cancer services, and we hope that the long-term cancer plan—should one arrive—makes that part of its work.

Last month, NHS England made it clear to us that it was focusing on delivering the NHS long-term plan for cancer. In many ways, that emphasis on delivery is welcome. The programmes being implemented as part of that work are positive, and I have covered some of them today, but recent research from the International Cancer Benchmarking Partnership has shown that national cancer plans are worth far more than the paper they are written on. The ICBP found that the countries that have made the biggest improvements in cancer since 1995 are those that have ambitious, detailed and costed plans for

[*Steve Brine*]

improving cancer services that are open to scrutiny by those whose job it is to do that—namely, us. Denmark and England used to be at the bottom of the league table for cancer, but thanks to consistent national cancer plans with associated long-term investment, the Danes have made rapid improvements, and they now leave us lagging behind.

In conclusion, the Health and Social Care Committee's report on cancer services found that there are many areas where the Government and the NHS are doing really good work and using the unique benefits of our national health service, but there are too many other areas where we can go further and faster to improve cancer services and outcomes. I hope the Minister will confirm that the Government intend to do so through the promised 10-year cancer plan.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We have a further debate this afternoon. In order to ensure equality of Back-Bench contributions across the afternoon, I advise colleagues to speak for no more than about 10 minutes, which will enable remaining Back Benchers to get in later.

1.33 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this debate, and I want to express my appreciation for the work of the Select Committee and for the way its Chair, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), presented the report and the way forward. It is very instructive and informative, and I cannot disagree.

I must make some declarations of interest. I am, and have been for some time, vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for radiotherapy. I want to confine my remarks to radiotherapy, although I do have a broader interest as vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer. People might not believe this, but I worked for almost 15 years in an NHS diagnostic laboratory, so I have a little bit of knowledge of the front-line. I served for five years as a member of the Health Committee when I was first elected, under the chairmanship of Stephen Dorrell initially and then Sarah Wollaston. I found that to be one of the most interesting and rewarding things I have done in the House of Commons since being elected.

I also served on the Health and Social Care Public Bill Committee—I must thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for putting me on that Committee—which was a marathon. I remind Members who were not around at the time that part of the justification put forward by the then Prime Minister and the coalition Government for those major reforms and restructuring of the national health service, including the commissioning of cancer services, was the poor outcomes on cancer. The system we have now was born out of a recognition that we needed to do better.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who chairs the APPG for radiotherapy, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is an assiduous advocate for improved cancer services, not just in Northern Ireland but throughout the country.

I am delighted that this report signposts the way to future work. I am very pleased that the hon. Member for Winchester indicated that it is his intention, with the agreement of the Committee, to do further work on how we might achieve the laudable 75% diagnosis target by 2028. I am pleased that the Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), is responding to the debate. I am sure that, like some of her predecessors, including the hon. Member for Winchester, she will grow tired of me banging the drum for cancer services, and for radiotherapy in particular, but there are some very important points and sound advice that come not from me, although I should say that I am a cancer survivor. I have had lymphatic cancer on three occasions, and I have benefited from surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy, so I understand what is involved and I value the vast improvements there have been in all those pillars of cancer treatment.

The sexy thing on cancer services is early diagnosis. It captures a lot of headlines, and the hon. Member for Winchester was right to point that out, but it goes hand in glove with having the requisite treatment capacity. With the best will in the world, the investment in new diagnostic hubs, which I welcome and is laudable, will simply increase the number of patients in the system. If we are to improve outcomes for cancer patients, we simply must address the issues around cancer treatment capacity.

I believe the Minister has a copy of the six-point plan for improving outcomes from the APPG and the charity Radiotherapy UK. We are not saying that radiotherapy is somehow in competition with the other pillars of cancer treatment; rather, it complements them. Advancements in science, technology and skills, with the introduction of artificial intelligence, the ability to map tumours precisely and incredible advancements in MRI scanning facilities, used in parallel with precision radiotherapy machines, gives us an opportunity to make a quantum leap in treatment and to improve productivity.

The cancer workforce is very small; it is only around 6,500 nationally. They are a highly skilled, highly motivated group of individuals who are doing a fantastic job, and I pay tribute to the cancer workforce, particularly those who work in the field of radiotherapy, who are holding the line at the moment and facing growing pressures in the system.

As a country, we spend about 5% of our dedicated cancer budget—not 5% of the entire NHS budget—on radiotherapy. If we look at international comparators, which we must do, we see that the OECD average is about 9%, so we are spending about half as much as other similar developed industrial nations. To put that into context—because sometimes we get lost in the figures—the NHS spends more on a single cancer drug, Herceptin, than on the entire radiotherapy service across the country.

I want to touch on commissioning, which is an issue that can be readily addressed and that came about as a consequence of the 2012 Lansley reforms. We took that up directly with the Minister when she kindly met a delegation earlier this week. Cancer services are currently nationally commissioned by NHS England, but there are things that could be done rapidly to increase treatment capacity by addressing some of the anomalies in the current tariff system.

Perversely, NHS trusts that have the latest advanced precision radiotherapy equipment are financially disadvantaged from using it because of the tariff system. Bizarrely, patients are being treated with 30 fractions of radiotherapy when it is perfectly possible to treat them with four, five or six fractions of precisely delivered radiotherapy if the machines are available and the staff are trained to do it. In many cases, the machines are there but the tariff system works against rolling out that facility. That is completely perverse and it is crazy that we do not do that.

We can learn from examples of what is happening in similar European countries. The Chair of the Select Committee mentioned the rapid improvements that have been made in Denmark as a result of having a well-thought-through, well-developed and well-scrutinised plan to improve cancer services. Rightly, some European countries also have diagnostic hubs, but in many cases they are combined diagnostic and treatment hubs, so it is conceivable that patients go in for diagnosis and rapidly begin their treatment—in some European countries, on the same day. Many patients here wait a month, and far too many wait more than two months—62 days—before their treatment starts.

I have some particular points to make to the Minister, which we also raised with her directly. The Chair of the Select Committee mentioned the new cancer plan. As a House and as a nation, we need some clarity on whether there will be a new 10-year cancer plan and whether the Department and the Ministers are making the case to the Treasury to secure the necessary funding. I hope that, as part of that, the Minister will look at the six-point plan for improved radiotherapy services that she has in her possession. Even without a cancer plan, however, there are things that could be done immediately to address the issues around the tariff system and the bureaucracy that holds back technology, which NHS England could easily resolve.

We are going to move to a new commissioning system with integrated care boards over large areas, but they have no capital budget and their funding is revenue based, so we must address the issue of those centres across the country. It is wonderful if people live near the Royal Marsden, which is one of the finest hospitals not just in the country or in London, but probably in the world, but if people live in the south-west, Cumbria or the north-east, they cannot readily access such a tremendous centre. We must address some of those health inequalities before the new commissioning arrangements come in, so that we have a systematic approach to replacing machines that are more than 10 years old, rather than having to make out a business case and compete against other centres that may already be well provided with the latest technology.

We are on a time limit, so I will wrap up, because I do not want to incur the wrath of Madam Deputy Speaker. I give the Minister credit for her commitment and aspiration to improve cancer outcomes and to have a first-class service. I hope that the Health and Social Care Committee will play its role in scrutinising the cancer plan, or the Minister's plans to improve cancer services. I am pleased that she recognises the validity of the representations that have been made already and that there is an urgent need to address the tariff issue. I would like an assurance that that will be done quickly, not in a year or two, because there is clear evidence that it could improve outcomes and it is what we call low-hanging fruit.

There is a lot more that I could say and lots of figures that I could quote—for example, I am concerned about the latest cancer waiting times; the Minister attended our presentation where it was shown graphically that there are huge variations across the regions. The Government must address that. I think we could get cross-party support for a sensible cancer plan, so I look forward to seeing the proposals that she comes up with when she has consulted with her colleagues and the Treasury.

1.46 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who speaks with much knowledge and personal experience, which makes a huge difference. I welcome the report of the Health and Social Care Committee on cancer services, and the subsequent response from the Government. I commend all Select Committee members involved in producing that excellent report and I have every confidence that more quality reports will be produced on this subject and many others under the leadership of my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine).

I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the report further. I will focus on community diagnostic centres and the role of diagnostics more generally in supporting cancer services. With 91 community diagnostic centres already open, a further 19 announced yesterday and 40 more to come before March 2025, this is definitely a good news story. I am delighted to have a community diagnostic centre in my constituency at Ilkeston Community Hospital. It opened a year ago. In its first eight months, it delivered more than 6,500 tests, checks and scans. To date, across all the community diagnostic centres that have opened, 2.4 million tests, checks and scans have been carried out. That is excellent news, but not the full story.

The success of the upcoming 10-year cancer plan—we hope that it is upcoming and has not been shelved—as well as tackling the backlog, elective recovery plans and levelling up, depends heavily on diagnostics. Diagnostics, whether in vivo or in vitro, are crucial to the overwhelming majority of patient pathways and are central to health outcomes. I know that the royal colleges, specifically the Royal College of Radiologists, and many other organisations support investment in improving cancer services across England and, at the same time, addressing historic postcode lotteries created over recent decades.

Community diagnostic centres have an important role to play in this, but they bring their own problems. There are already existing chronic workforce shortages and ageing equipment that prevent cancer diagnosis and improvements in cancer care. There is a shortfall of 30%—1,453—full-time equivalent clinical radiologists and a 17%—148—shortfall of clinical oncologists. Those shortfalls vary in severity for each region, but I take a particular interest in the east midlands, where my constituency is. The east midlands has the same shortfall of clinical radiologists as the national average, which is 30%, but the shortfall in clinical oncologists is above the national average, at 28%, while 19% of clinical radiologists and 18% of clinical oncologists are forecast to retire in the next five years, adding even further pressure on a workforce already struggling to meet demand.

A global study has found that a treatment delay of four weeks, which could be caused by a workforce shortage, is associated with a 6% to 13% increase in the risk of death, and that worries me as it could have a

[Maggie Throup]

detrimental impact on the outcomes for cancer patients across Erewash, however hard those in post work. If we are to improve cancer services in England, we must invest in clinical radiology and clinical oncology training places to ensure that there are enough clinicians throughout a cancer patient's pathway. I know there is competition for clinicians across all disciplines, but, if we are to improve outcomes for our cancer patients, we need to attract radiologists and oncologists.

I pay tribute to everyone involved in this aspect of medicine, whatever their role, and of course our NHS workforce across all disciplines. I include all the amazing people, whether healthcare professionals or volunteers, at my local hospice, Treetops Hospice Care, who each day make the end of life a better experience for so many of my constituents—a huge thank you to everybody.

I have mentioned that one of the other barriers to community diagnostic centres reaching their full potential is the lack of investment in equipment in the existing system. The UK has fewer scanners than most comparable countries in the OECD: it has 8.8 CT scanners per million of the population while France has 18.2 and Germany has 35.1; it has 7.4 MRI scanners per million of the population, while France has 15.4 and Germany has 34.7. Industry surveys have shown that one in 10 CT scanners and nearly a third of MRI scanners in UK hospitals are over 10 years old, and 10 years is usually the age at which this equipment can be considered obsolete and must be replaced.

In June, the Royal College of Radiologists surveyed a representative sample of its members in England about equipment needs, revealing that 49% of clinical radiologists and 21% of clinical oncologists said they do not have the equipment they need to deliver a safe and effective service for patients in their department or cancer centre. Only 32% of clinical radiologists and 54% of clinical oncologists said their equipment is fit for purpose, with the rest saying it is substandard or only acceptable to some extent. There must be a comprehensive audit of all diagnostic equipment across England so that investment is made in the right equipment where it is needed most.

I have some questions for the Minister, for whom I have great respect. I know just how much she cares about getting it right for patients. First, are clinical radiology and clinical oncology training places being invested in to ensure there are enough clinicians throughout a cancer patient's pathway and, if so, will that investment include both the 50% of trainee costs covered by Health Education England and the other expenses incurred by trusts? When it comes to equipment, are community diagnostic centres taking the investment preference over and above the replacement of obsolete diagnostic equipment in hospitals, and will an audit of all diagnostic equipment be carried out? Of course, as has been mentioned, one of the elephants in the room—or, more correctly, in the Chamber—is: how do we help to prevent people from getting cancer in the first place?

Across the UK, there are huge health disparities. When heat map after heat map is laid over the UK—whether for high smoking rates, high levels of obesity, high rates of cardiovascular disease, high rates of cancer, excess alcohol consumption or poorer health outcomes—they all show that the same areas are affected detrimentally. Therefore, we need to consider how we are going to

achieve the Government's targets to become smoke-free by 2030 and to halve childhood obesity by 2030. Perhaps, after the festive season, there can be a fresh look at measures to tackle excess alcohol, because alcohol, smoking and obesity are all markers of and can all cause cancer. If we are serious about tackling cancer, we need to be serious about preventing it as well, and it is never too late. We are always excited to hear about new therapies that have been proved to be effective, but surely we need to get as excited about preventing cancer in the first place, so my final question for the Minister is: when can we expect the health disparities White Paper to be published?

There are many innovations to harness across all diagnostics, while community diagnostic centres, genomics and AI have a role to play, as do many more innovations, but until the unprecedented challenges—including the huge workforce pressures, out-of-date equipment and preventive measures continuing to be watered down—are addressed, cancer diagnosis and treatment will never reach their true potential. The Government state in their response to the Select Committee's report that

“the Government's forthcoming 10 Year Cancer Plan will set a new vision for how we will lead the world in cancer care, including ensuring we have the right workforce in place.”

That is an admirable ambition, and we all want the Government to succeed. Indeed, they must succeed, as this will be transformational for the life chances of my constituents in Erewash and those of the whole nation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester has said, I look forward to reading the Government's 10-year cancer plan very soon.

1.56 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), a former Health Minister, who spoke with so much authority about the current workforce challenges, but also the need to improve and invest in better diagnostic equipment. I also commend the Select Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), for perfectly outlining the Committee's report.

As somebody who worked in our NHS as a cancer pharmacist before entering this House and has worked as a regular volunteer pharmacist at my local hospital in Coventry, I know just how overwhelmed and overstretched NHS cancer services are. The recently published report from the Health and Social Care Committee on cancer services uncovered that, in September, only 60.5% of patients started treatment within 62 days of urgent referral. In Coventry this year, only 57.2% of patients at University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust began their treatment within two months of being referred to the hospital by their GP. That is against a national target of 85%, so in Coventry and across the country cancer patients are being failed, making the Government's declaration earlier this year of a war on cancer look more like a retreat than a tactical advance.

The reality is that waiting lists are up, referrals are slower than ever, screening is in crisis, patient satisfaction has plummeted, medical professionals are leaving the sector in droves and the sector faces major structural challenges. If the Government are serious about making inroads into improving cancer care over the long term, it is crucial that they build a cancer workforce that is fit for the future. I welcome the Government's commitment

to publish a workforce plan next year, but they must commit to publishing the plan in full and deliver the much-needed funding for any workforce growth to succeed.

Just to take clinical directors as an example, 99% have said that they are concerned about morale and burnout across the clinical radiology workforce. If we continue to treat our medical professionals with contempt, no one should be surprised if they decide to look for pastures new. If allowed to worsen, I fear that this workforce crisis will lead to expensive outsourcing and it will inevitably place greater strains on the public finances. Equally, I am deeply concerned that the Government have so far failed to recommit to a long-term cancer strategy.

Under the last Labour Government, there was a long-term strategy and by and large we delivered it. That was reflected in record high patient satisfaction, record low waiting times, speedy referrals and improving survival rates across the board, so that is exactly what cancer services deserve.

We know that one in two of us will get cancer in our lifetime, yet cancer outcomes in the UK continue to lag behind those of comparable European countries, as many Members have mentioned. This is disappointing to hear and highlights why we need a 10-year cancer plan. I am concerned that there are rumours that the plan may have been scrapped; given how many resources and how much energy have been put into developing the plan, I hope the Minister will confirm whether that is the case.

Many Members have spoken about prevention, which is at the heart of the Committee's latest cancer report. Four in 10 cancers in the UK are preventable, yet only through taking action to prevent cancer developing in the first place will we save lives and reduce pressure on our NHS. I welcome the successful public health campaigns on smoking and obesity in recent years, but much more needs to be done to ensure patients are made aware of the risk factors in developing cancer and can recognise its early signs and symptoms.

Shockingly, smoking is still the biggest cause of cancer and death in the UK, causing around 150 cancer cases every day and 125,000 deaths each year. Recent Cancer Research UK modelling suggests that England will miss its smoke-free 2030 target by seven years for the population as a whole and by almost double that for the most deprived communities, who will not meet this target until the mid-2040s. So I urge the Government to invest in the resources and services that encourage and support people to quit smoking for good. Only through this long-term investment are we going to see the preventive results we urgently need.

As the recently elected chair of the all-party pharmacy group and a former oncology pharmacist, I will briefly focus on drugs. As Health and Social Care Committee Chair the hon. Member for Winchester said earlier, drug research and development is not within the remit of the NHS. However, much investment is needed on research and development for new drug treatments, particularly for rare cancers such as liver cancer.

I also want to speak briefly about aseptic services. I still work in aseptic pharmacy and understand the challenges and difficulties facing pharmacy aseptic services. The failure of the firms who make the cancer drugs to meet demand and the subsequent delays in patient

treatment mean many treatments are repeatedly rescheduled. Frustratingly, this also means more work for NHS staff, who are already under enormous pressure. Also, increasing vacancy rates in aseptic services mean that services are working at, or above, capacity. These posts are hard to fill due to the fact that only a small group of healthcare professionals have the specific skills required, and given the small number of new staff entering aseptic services the filling of a vacancy at one hospital often results in a vacancy at a neighbouring hospital. I urge the Minister to take this challenge seriously, and to recognise that delays to treatment and referrals and cancellations must be addressed as they impact the ability of hospital pharmacy teams to supply these vital treatments.

The Government must also take note and understand that the relationship with the firms supplying these drugs and NHS units is of fundamental importance. Hospitals must work in partnership with these companies to ensure that all parties do all they can to make sure the treatment is available on time and when patients need it; at the moment this is not happening. Pharmacy teams must be part of all capacity planning discussions; they are the ones on the frontline and they know what patients need. Aseptic units with capacity must also have the power to support other hospitals within their integrated care system areas. There will always be a small number of products that have to be prepared locally on a patient-specific basis; however, currently no mechanism exists for these products to be made without relying upon the manufacturers. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with the Minister further, and I hope she recognises the serious challenges aseptic pharmacies currently face.

I have covered a lot of ground in my remarks today, but that is because of the scale of the challenge facing cancer care across the NHS. Whether driving down waiting times and eliminating needless delays, growing the workforce to treat cancer patients, boosting cancer prevention services, or facing down the challenges facing aseptic services, the Government certainly have a lot to do to improve cancer services and patient outcomes. I know the Minister is committed to improving those services and outcomes, and as a member of the Health and Social Care Committee I look forward to seeing, I hope, the much-awaited cancer plan and scrutinising it. I sincerely hope that this time next year the situation has improved for my constituents and all cancer patients nationally.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call shadow Minister Liz Kendall.

2.5 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this hugely important debate and the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) for securing it. Ever since he was elected in 2010—the same year as me—he has championed health issues. We have sat on several Bill Committees together and I know that he will continue to champion health issues in his new role as Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. I was particularly pleased to hear him say he is determined to continue focusing on cancer care as that issue touches so many of our lives personally and professionally. I wish him well in his role.

[Liz Kendall]

The central point made in the Select Committee report is that early diagnosis and prompt treatment of cancer is critical to improving survival chances and to bringing the UK up to the standards of other countries. The grim reality is that patients are having to wait longer at every stage of the process and the fundamental reason for that is a shortage of staff. The report says:

“Neither earlier diagnosis nor additional prompt cancer treatment will be possible without addressing gaps in the cancer workforce and we found little evidence of a serious effort to do this.”

I am afraid this is a terrible indictment of the Government's record on cancer care, and that is despite repeated warnings not only from Members on this side of the House but from cancer charities, NHS staff and a range of other organisations.

Members may know that the former Chair of the Select Committee and now Chancellor used to rightly say that the Government needed to do far more in terms of the workforce and that they did not have a proper workforce strategy; indeed, I think he may have joined Labour Members in the Lobby in voting to try to make that happen. Since becoming Chancellor he has been more silent on the issue. Labour, on the other hand, does have a clear workforce plan that would help make serious improvements in cancer care alongside many other parts of NHS treatment. I will say more about that later.

I want to start, however, by setting out some of the current situation on waiting times for cancer care, and there are problems every step of the way. More than 60% of cancers are diagnosed following a GP referral, yet the report rightly says pressures on general practice mean there is a big increased risk of cancer being missed in primary care. The report says:

“The NHS has lost 1,704 fully-qualified full-time GPs since 2015 despite repeated commitments to recruit more”.

The impact of these GP shortages is clear.

The standard is supposed to be that 93% of patients should wait two weeks between initial referral from a GP to cancer treatment. As of October this year only 77.8% of patients were seen within two weeks. That means 53,128 patients waited longer than they should. That is in contrast to when Labour last left Government, when over 95% of patients were seen within two weeks. The Government will no doubt say that that is entirely down to the covid pandemic. I am absolutely clear that covid has had a huge impact on cancer care, but let me remind the House that the Government were failing to hit the two-week referral target even before the pandemic. There are many problems in many other steps along the way. The Government have never hit their diagnosis target of at least 75% of patients being told whether they have cancer within 28 days of an urgent referral from either their GP or a cancer screening programme.

As hon. Members have said, patients are waiting longer and longer for treatment. If we look at the two-month target, we see that in the East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust, which serves the Minister's constituents, 27% of patients are waiting longer than two months to have their treatment. That is two months when people will be terrified and anxious about what will happen to them. Will their cancer be getting worse? Their family members will be worried, too. In Leicester, the city that I represent, more than

half of patients are waiting longer than two months for their treatment. I am afraid that the human cost of that has yet to be fully recognised by the Government.

The key reason for that is a lack of staff. Alongside the shortages of GPs that I mentioned, the report says that

“the NHS is estimated, on a full-time equivalent basis, to be short of 189 clinical oncologists, 390 consultant pathologists and 1,939 radiologists, and will be short of 3,371 specialist cancer nurses by 2030.”

It adds that there is “no detailed plan” to address that. When the Minister rises, I hope that she will set out what she intends to do about that. The Labour Party has set out its long-term workforce plan, which will have independent workforce projections, new career paths in the NHS and new types of health and care professionals to help solve those problems. That includes doubling the number of medical school places to 15,000 a year, doubling the number of district nurses who qualify each year and creating 10,000 more nursing clinical placements, paid for by scrapping the non-dom tax status, because we believe that people who come and live in this great country should pay their fair share of tax.

I could say far more about transforming cancer care and the need to fundamentally shift the focus of support towards prevention and early intervention, with more action on tobacco, on obesity, on exercise, and on alcohol—all the things that we know make such a difference. I could say far more about end-of-life care, which the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) spoke about, and the need to join NHS services with social care and support so that people have choice about how and where they die. Within these time constraints, I want to say that I am optimistic about the future facing cancer patients in this country. There have been huge advances in science, medicine and technology, and Britain has been leading the way in much of that. It gives us hope for the future, but cancer patients and their families need the Government to act to solve the huge problems in the NHS, starting with the workforce, to get those waits down, get early diagnosis up and transform survival rates for cancer treatment.

2.13 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Helen Whately): I very much thank my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) for raising the Select Committee's report on cancer today. I know that he is passionate about this issue both as a former cancer Minister and for the personal reasons that he mentioned, as do I. The Committee's 12th report makes valuable recommendations, and I am grateful to it for all its hard work. I assure him and hon. Members that we are working night and day, together with our colleagues in the NHS, on three priorities for cancer in particular. They are: to recover from the backlog caused by the pandemic; to get better at early diagnosis and treatment, using the tools and technologies that we have; and to invest in research and innovation, because we know that advances in such things as genomics and artificial intelligence have the potential to transform our experience of cancer as a society.

This is my first opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend on his election as Chair of the Health and Social Care Select Committee, where I know he will do an excellent job, bringing his expertise as well as his passion

on the subject to bear. I also welcome the focus that he will bring to the Committee on cancer and prevention, as he mentioned in his remarks. I am truly sorry that he has lost members of his family to cancer, including, as he said, his father. He rightly said that cancer affects pretty much everyone in our country in one way or another.

My hon. Friend talked about some of the challenges that we and our NHS face in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. In his time as cancer Minister, he was absolutely right to focus on early diagnosis, because we know that that makes such a difference. As he said, he set the 75% ambition for early diagnosis to be achieved by 2028, and the NHS is indeed working towards that at the moment. He talked about wanting to see the plan for achieving that ambition—I say “ambition” because, as he will know, it was intentionally set as a stretching target—and about the importance of us having the capacity to treat cancer. I think that is currently higher than it was before the pandemic, but I certainly see the need to expand it further.

My hon. Friend talked about the importance of surgical hubs. We have 89 of them, but more are planned, with £1.5 billion of capital funding recently approved for their expansion and future new hubs. He rightly talked about the importance of cancer research and the alignment of that with cancer treatment and cancer services. He also talked about the significance of health disparities and the prevalence of risk factors such as higher smoking and obesity rates in more deprived communities. I will address some of those points during my speech.

The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) spoke in particular about radiotherapy as well as giving a broader perspective. As he said, we met the other day together with Professor Pryce, and he raised his concerns with me about the use of radiotherapy, the impact of tariffs, the potential for better use of radiotherapy machines, staff, and several other points in the plan. It is too soon to give him the quality of answers that I would like on those points, but I am looking into exactly what he raised and will get back to him and those others we met as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup)—I have huge respect for her, including the work that she did as a Health Minister and the expertise she brings to the debate—is absolutely right about the importance of community diagnostic centres. We are rolling them out around the country, with 19 more just announced, increasing our capacity to diagnose cancers promptly. She also spoke about workforce pressures. I am sure she will know that the 2017 cancer workforce plan was delivered and, in fact, exceeded by over 200 additional staff. Since then, Health Education England has received additional funding of £50 million for the cancer workforce in the last financial year and this one.

I agree with my hon. Friend that we should continue to focus on ensuring that we are training, supporting and retaining the cancer workforce that we need. That is so important to achieving our ambitions in cancer as well as the wider NHS workforce. Indeed, many of those who work in the NHS will be looking after patients with cancer, not just those who might have a specific cancer workforce label. I am sure she will know that we are well on our way to achieving our ambition of 50,000 more nurses in the NHS, with over 29,000 more at the moment.

My hon. Friend also spoke about cancer equipment. For instance, since 2016, £160 million of capital investment has been invested in radiotherapy equipment. I will take away her call for an equipment audit. She also importantly talked about obesity and alcohol as risk factors, although I appreciated that she said we should focus on alcohol reduction after the festive season. I thank her for allowing us to enjoy a drink over Christmas.

Grahame Morris: I am amazed that figures are not to hand on how many radiotherapy machines are more than 10 years old. Is it unreasonable to expect that NHS England would have an ongoing audit to identify which machines need replacing on a planned basis? Will that be addressed?

Helen Whately: There will be huge numbers of figures on things that NHS England will be monitoring. I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash that I am very happy to look at her specific suggestion, on the extent to which the data already exists or whether we should be collecting it. That is part of what I will be looking into when I follow up on that.

We heard from the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), who brings really valuable experience to this topic. She said that she is a former oncology pharmacist and, if I heard her right, that she also volunteers as a pharmacist in her local hospital. That is hugely welcome experience to bring to the debate. I am very happy to speak to her more about some of the challenges she raised. I will follow up after the debate to see if we can get that in our diaries.

The hon. Lady pointed out that we are not achieving our targets on treatment rates, which is absolutely true, but she also spoke about cancer referrals. On that point, I want to share some good news. More people than ever before are being referred to hospitals by their GPs to see if they have cancer. The latest data for October this year, published only this morning, shows that almost 250,000 urgent cancer referrals were made by GPs in England, which is up about 109% on the levels in October 2019. It is 10,000 more than in October last year and over 35,000 more than in October 2020. That is thanks to the hard work of GPs, to the 91 community diagnostic centres which have carried out more than 2 million additional scans, tests and checks already, and to all the people who have come forward and got themselves checked. We know it is not always easy if you are worried that you might have something that could be cancer. We are working hard to encourage people to come forward if they are worried, so that we can improve early diagnosis. That is why we are working to raise awareness with campaigns such as “Help us, Help you” alongside targeting case-finding efforts such as targeted lung health checks. Such initiatives are successfully countering the pandemic’s negative impact on cancer referrals.

In further important news, NHS England announced it is expanding direct access to diagnostic scans across all GP practices. That will cut waiting times and speed up diagnosis or the all-clear for patients. Since November, every GP team has been able to directly order CT scans, ultrasounds or brain MRIs for patients with concerning symptoms, but who fall outside the NICE guidance threshold. Non-specific symptom pathways are transforming the way that people with symptoms not specific to one cancer, such as weight loss or fatigue, are either diagnosed or have cancer ruled out. That gives GPs a much-needed

[Helen Whately]

referral route, while speeding up and streamlining the process so that, where needed, people can start treatment earlier. Thankfully, with the increased level of referrals, the majority of people referred will be given the all-clear. However, it is crucial to start treatment promptly for those who are diagnosed, while giving peace of mind to those who do not have cancer.

On treatment, my Department has committed an additional £8 billion for the next two years, on top of the £2 billion elective recovery fund, to increase elective activity including for cancer services, because speed of treatment following early diagnosis is of course very important.

I am looking at the time and I know that I need to try to wrap up promptly. I will skip as fast as I can to a conclusion, while answering a couple of points that were raised as we go.

Many hon. Members commented on the pandemic. I recognise that the pandemic severely disrupted health services. The recovery of performance is a multi-year effort. The NHS is working very hard with a delivery plan specifically to tackle the covid elective care backlog. Under the plan, reducing the number of patients waiting over 62 days for treatment is a top priority.

Many hon. Members are interested in the progress of the 10-year cancer plan. We are reviewing the responses we have received on the call for evidence to that plan. In parallel, I am closely scrutinising holding the NHS to account on its elective recovery plan, a major part of which is cancer care, as well as looking to the future and making sure we drive forward research and innovation, including, for example, with our recently announced life sciences cancer mission which will invest over £22 million in a vaccine taskforce approach to cancer research.

I would like once again to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester for securing this debate today. I look forward to working with him and other hon. Members on improving cancer outcomes.

2.25 pm

Steve Brine: I thank all hon. Members who have spoken today. My message to the Minister is this: prevention is the new cure. Tobacco causes about 150 cancers a day. It is still the biggest cause of cancer and premature death in the UK. My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) was therefore quite right to mention our ambition on smokefree. Being overweight and obesity are the second-biggest causes of cancer in the UK, so I say to the Government to be ambitious about their methods to drive that agenda and drive down the number of people who will be overweight in future. That will help us with prevention.

We have to prevent cancer and we have to diagnose more. We must predict and diagnose upstream, as I mentioned in my remarks, and then we have to treat promptly—all the things the Minister mentioned. Above all, we have to be ambitious. When I set the 28-day faster cancer diagnosis target, I always used to say to the cancer community, “28 days is not a target that we have to aim for. We should do it a lot quicker than that.” It would be fantastic to reach 75%, but we should not leave that as the end of our ambition, because that still leaves a quarter not being diagnosed early and therefore potentially losing their battle. So be ambitious. This is one of the best jobs in Government. Be ambitious and you will save a lot of lives.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Twelfth Report of the Health and Social Care Committee, Session 2021-22, Cancer services, HC 551, and the Government Response, HC 345.

BBC Local Radio

2.26 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of BBC Local Radio.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the 100-odd colleagues from across the House who joined the application for this debate. For those who are watching and perhaps thinking that the Benches are a bit sparse, actually if everybody speaks for 10 minutes, we will fill the time perfectly. This is a great opportunity for colleagues across the House to send a message not only to the excellent Minister on the Front Bench, but to the BBC. I also thank the House of Commons Library for its excellent and balanced paper on the subject. I will try to explain to the BBC, with colleagues, where it has gone fundamentally wrong with the demise of local radio. Local radio provides a service to our constituents and our communities that commercial radio cannot provide. If the BBC is trying to compete with commercial radio in that space, then frankly it has lost the ethos of what the BBC is supposed to be about.

There is a tax on all our constituents who have a TV or a computer that is able to receive a BBC programme. It is called the licence fee and it is a criminal offence not to have it. It was put in place all those years ago so that the BBC could provide a service that people could trust was impartial and was not going to come from any other source.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that impartiality is right at the front of the BBC's ethos, but that in practice many of us in this Chamber—certainly, I do—find that BBC local radio, in my case Radio Humberside, is far more impartial than any national programme?

Sir Mike Penning: My right hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. I will come on to explain the matter of trust and how local radio is not allowed a level playing field, when it comes to programmes such as “Newsnight” or the cost of some BBC presenters. During covid, my constituents were massively reliant on the information coming from Three Counties Radio. They trusted it, they understood it and the presenters were literally their voice of information about what was going on during the pandemic.

As the cold weather hits parts of the country—fortunately, although my part of the country is cold, the weather there will be nowhere near as difficult as the sort that some will have—there is no doubt that some schools will close. Where is the information that people can trust going to come from? Clearly, it will come from their local radio station. Some commercial radio stations will pick that up—that is fine—but actually that is the job of the BBC, because it takes the licence fee.

The BBC gets about £3.5 billion from the licence fee and a further £1.5 billion from other sources. It is not for this House to tell the BBC how to spend that money, but we can give it advice. Some of that advice has been brought to me by my constituents, who are literally in tears that some presenters on local radio stations in my part of the world have been given pre-redundancy notices before Christmas, telling them that they should apply for their jobs. In some cases, those jobs will not be there.

Let us look at what the BBC has decided to do. It is proposing to allow our local radio stations to go a bit longer in the morning, until about 2 pm, and then we will be regionalised.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. An announcement was made last week about my local radio station, Radio Foyle, and we will not even get morning programming. There will not be a local voice on Radio Foyle in the north-west of Northern Ireland until 1 o'clock in the afternoon. The breakfast programme is being stripped away and more than half of the news staff are being got rid of to save £420,000. BBC Northern Ireland's budget is £55 million. In effect, it will destroy a local radio station, going against what its own charter says about providing local people with access to local news, all to save a measly £420,000. The BBC has a massive number of staff in Belfast and two massive buildings, but the axe is falling on the local community in the north-west of Northern Ireland. Surely the right hon. Gentleman would agree that that is an absolute disgrace.

Sir Mike Penning: The hon. Gentleman represents the voice of his constituents in an excellent way in the House this afternoon. Knowing the Province as I do—once in uniform and then as a Minister of State in the Northern Ireland Office—I know how important the local radio stations are. The interesting thing is that I do not think the BBC really knows what it wants to do. What is its ethos? Where is it going? For instance, in my part of the world it will cut local radio in the afternoon, but in his part of the world it will cut it in the morning. I would argue that both are very important.

To go back to my earlier point, we are now in winter. Parents will take their children to school, and it is quite possible that sometimes—especially in the northern parts of this great country of ours—those children will have to go home early. Schools will do their level best, but it is the local radio stations that will tell parents which schools will be open the following day, which will be open that evening, and whether they need to collect their children early—I hear that all the time on my local radio station. The people involved are dedicated, and they are not the very rich people who work for the BBC.

When the Secretary of State came to the House to answer questions on this issue a few weeks ago, it was shocking that the Department had been told what was happening only the day before, because I had been told on the Friday by some local radio stations that they knew about it then. It is shocking that what is really an extension of Government—because the BBC takes the licence fee—did not tell the Government what was going on so that we could tell the House. That is absolutely disgusting and fundamentally wrong. Mr Speaker quite rightly complains bitterly when things are announced outside the House, but this was also about people's jobs and our communication with our constituents.

I went back to listen to some of the comments from people in local radio—I have to be careful here, because I want to protect them and not put them in an even more difficult position—and they said, “Mr Penning, it is not a level playing field. I'm not allowed to have another job, apart from working for the BBC.” A few people are on slightly different contracts, but the vast majority have contracts that say they cannot have another job in broadcasting.

[Sir Mike Penning]

I named a gentleman in this Chamber who works for the BBC and who has been on our TV quite a lot recently because of the World cup—the gentleman's name is Gary Lineker. I said that I thought that it was fundamentally unfair that he earns £1.35 million, or slightly more—that has been declared by the BBC as his income—and others, such as Zoe Ball on Radio 2's "The Zoe Ball Breakfast Show", earn just short of £1 million. I do not know about Zoe Ball's contract, but what we know about Gary Lineker's contract is that not only does he do advertisements for a certain company that makes crisps, but he works on BT Sport. My local radio people are not allowed to do that.

I got lambasted by a *Daily Mail* journalist who said, "Stop picking on Gary Lineker." I am not picking on him; I just think it is unfair that our local radio people are now prevented from having a job, while he can go and do jobs galore. I am not going to be a hypocrite; I have declared other interests outside this House. That is within my contract. Others who work in local radio cannot work in other ways. There are people who have been given their pre-redundancy notice and told that they need to apply for their job, but their jobs will not be there.

What can the Minister do for us this afternoon? He is an excellent Minister, but his job, rightly, is not to run the BBC. It is for this House, however, to send a message to the BBC that it has got it fundamentally wrong to attack that low-hanging fruit—our local radio station presenters—without understanding the damage that that will do to our communities around the country.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): This is a message that we need to send not only to the BBC, but to the regulator, Ofcom. The service licences under which BBC local radio operates are so woolly that, frankly, there are no obligations in place that require it to be specifically local to the area that it is required to serve. Given that we are in a mid-term review of the BBC, is it not time that Ofcom had some teeth and required the BBC to do what it is set out to do?

Sir Mike Penning: My hon. Friend has read my mind. As he may have noticed, I do not read speeches in this House because my dyslexia prevents me, so I try to memorise what I am going to say, and I was about to move on to Ofcom.

Because the licence fee is a tax and people have to pay it, there has to be regulation. Ofcom provides that regulation. It is for the Government to set the parameters, for Ofcom to regulate and for the BBC to decide how to deliver its services. I find it inconceivable that Ofcom would sit back and allow this to happen when it is Ofcom's job to ensure that the BBC fulfils its role and does what it was supposed to do when we set it up with a licence fee all those years ago.

I am conscious that many colleagues across the House want to speak this afternoon, and I am really interested to hear what they say. The BBC has done brilliant things and has some brilliant programmes. I have fallen out with it many a time; I do not go on "Newsnight" these days, because it is cheaper just to phone up all the people who watch it—200,000, which is smaller than the number of people who listen to their local radio station in my part of the world.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): My right hon. Friend and I share a local station, BBC Three Counties Radio. I am sure he agrees that every single one of its 250,000 listeners must enjoy the shows. As he says, it gives important local voices the power to reach into people's homes when they are needed—it did that perfectly during the pandemic. I pay tribute to BBC Three Counties and all its presenters for their work.

Sir Mike Penning: I too congratulate BBC Three Counties, not just because of its work in the pandemic but because it picks up many local issues for us.

I congratulate the BBC on managing to unite this House in a way that we probably have not seen for quite some time. This Chamber is confrontational by nature—it does what it says on the tin, really—but I can almost guarantee that colleagues are here today because they want to look after their constituents and want their constituents to get the best possible value from the BBC.

If this is all about money, I cannot understand why the BBC is spending £5 billion, of which £3.5 billion is taxpayers' money, but it cannot find a better way. If people cannot look after Radio Foyle instead of saving peanuts in cash terms, and if they cannot look after our local station Three Counties Radio, frankly they need to get another job, because they are not running their organisation correctly.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. My plan is to get everybody in, which we can do comfortably if colleagues speak for no more than about 10 minutes, as they did in the previous debate.

2.40 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I speak not only in my capacity as secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group, but to represent my constituents. The NUJ has circulated a briefing to all Members of Parliament who have expressed an interest in local radio. I will refer to elements of it because it sets what the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said in context.

I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. It is interesting that on this particular subject we have come together over the years on a cross-party basis to exert an influence on the BBC as best we can. Our debates in this House have exerted an influence: hon. Members who have been around for a while will remember previous debates in which we have fended off onslaughts on BBC radio.

Let me put our concerns on the record—I hope the BBC is listening. The current plans mean that most of the afternoon and evening output will be shared. Overall, BBC local staffing is expected to reduce by 48 posts. After 2 pm on weekdays, the BBC will produce 18 afternoon programmes across England. Local stations will be forced to share information. What will that do? Exactly as the right hon. Gentleman says, it will seriously diminish a service that is highly valued by listeners and plays a role for all in underpinning local democracy by holding us to account and reporting on what is happening—not just with MPs, but with local councils and local agencies.

As the right hon. Gentleman says, there is example after example of local BBC stations providing a conduit of information during crisis after crisis. From weather crises and covid to accidents and other unfortunate incidents, they provide the information people rely on. Why are they important, as against other stations? Because they are seen as a reliable source of information and they provide a vital service on which all our communities depend. The cuts mean that there will now be just 40 hours a week of guaranteed local programming.

Let me reiterate the role that constituents have told us BBC local radio does. It connects communities. It provides local news. It provides reportage of sport, entertainment and religious services. It has been the bedrock of the BBC's role as a public service. Interestingly, it is not just us saying that, but the BBC itself. In its latest annual report, the BBC boasts about how local radio

"delivered real value by keeping people safe and informed through challenging times such as Storm Arwen, where audiences in the North East were left without power for weeks."

The BBC itself gives examples from the pandemic, when many people were isolated in their homes. The BBC itself says "it makes a difference." That is why we are bewildered when 5.7 million people listen to local radio and it comes under attack once again.

There is quotation after quotation from people who may not be working in the service at the moment and may therefore be more independent. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that people do not want to put their jobs at risk at this stage. The former voice of BBC Radio Suffolk's afternoons, Lesley Dolphin—who was very well known to a lot of people—wrote this to the director-general of the BBC:

"BBC managers are proud that they have journalists on the ground in every county, but local radio is so much more than a news service—it is embedded in local communities and gives people a sense of place, a chance to celebrate heritage and art. It will be impossible to do that if programmes are shared across a wider area."

When we debated this issue recently, early in November, there was huge cross-party support for local radio. One Member said that local stations

"provide a lifeline for news and education, mitigate against rural isolation and support people's rural mental health."

Another said that it was

"a great incubator for new talent"

in his area, and a third described it as

"one of the crown jewels of our public sector broadcaster."—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2022; Vol. 721, c. 774-778.]

The importance of local broadcasting becomes even clearer when all of us are reporting the decline in local newspaper circulation in our areas. The BBC local radio service has stepped into that gap to an even greater extent to ensure that there is local reportage, holding us all—at every level of representative democracy—to account. *Press Gazette* has reported that 265 local newspaper titles have gone. The BBC says that it is pursuing a digital-first policy, chasing younger viewers, but the NUJ and others have put forward alternatives so that broadcasters can improve the whole system more effectively by working differently and using technological solutions. Unfortunately, the BBC has not engaged in that discussion constructively enough.

I agree with what the right hon. Gentleman said about staffing. All BBC local radio staff have now been told that their jobs are at risk. They have been told that

the managers will "roll out" the plans, which means that some of those staff will not know their futures for up to a year. We can imagine the sense of insecurity that that creates.

During the November debate, the Media Minister, the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), said the Government were

"disappointed that the BBC is reportedly planning to make such extensive cuts to its local radio output."—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2022; Vol. 721, c. 764.]

The view that we can express to the BBC is that this is a cross-party issue. It is certainly of concern to the Opposition parties, but it is also of deep concern within the Government. I will not let the Government off the hook, because I want to put on record my opposition to the freezing of the BBC licence fee, but in the context of the resources that the BBC now has, as the right hon. Gentleman said, there must be some element of prioritisation for the valuable role played by BBC local radio.

Let me quote from another broadcaster most people will recognise, Fi Glover, who has been a prominent broadcaster over the years. When she was interviewed recently on "The Media Show", she said:

"There has never been a more important time in the dissemination of information to have a strong local news network. If you can't tell the story of the people around you, who you know and see every day then into that void can fall really unpleasant things. Once that part of the forest has been cut down, it won't ever grow again."

So what did she think of these plans? She said,

"it is bonkers."

I agree with her completely. I hope that the BBC is listening, and I hope it will think again.

Let me say this on behalf of the NUJ: it stands ready to be involved in any consultations or negotiations to find an alternative way forward, which I think the majority of Members would also seek.

2.49 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on obtaining this debate. It is also a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). I do not often agree with what he says but, apart from a couple of sentences, I agreed with practically every word.

The BBC spends something like £4.1 billion each year on public service content, of which £477 million—just over 10%—is spent on radio. A quarter of that, or around 3% of the BBC's total spend, is spent on local radio, yet what BBC local radio provides is hugely valued by a very large number of listeners. It is an essential and widely trusted local information service.

I have listened to and appeared on BBC Essex over many years. The station's presenters, including Dave Monk, Sadie Nine and Sonia Watson, are familiar friends to many of my constituents. People share their living room with them, and their news reports are trusted. That was particularly the case during the covid pandemic, when all the surveys showed that people relied on and trusted information from local media more than information from almost any other source.

But it is not just about news. BBC local radio does a tremendous amount of community events to support voluntary organisations. Just a few weeks ago, I presented

[*Sir John Whittingdale*]

a Make a Difference award to one of my constituents in Essex who had been recognised by BBC Essex for her remarkable, life-saving bravery.

The BBC's mission is to be distinctive, and one of its public purposes is to serve the diverse communities of all the UK's nations and regions. BBC local radio does both. The requirement to be distinctive is something BBC local radio meets better than a lot of the rest of the BBC. Nobody else does what BBC local radio does. There are plenty of very good local radio stations—I have Heart Essex, Radio Essex and community stations such as Caroline Community Radio in my constituency—but they are predominantly music-based. They do not pretend to provide the kind of very localised talk-based content that only BBC local radio provides.

I accept that this year's licence fee settlement is difficult for the BBC, but £159 represents a lot of money for households, particularly with the rising cost of living, so it was the right decision to freeze the licence fee. That has put pressure on the BBC, but local radio is a tiny proportion of its expenditure, and the BBC tells us that it is not cutting the amount of money it spends but is redirecting it, so £19 million has been taken away from radio and put into online news.

I spoke to Rhodri Talfan Davies, the BBC's director of nations, about why the BBC made that decision, and he told me it was because people no longer listen to the radio to get their news and because people, particularly young people, are increasingly going online, and the BBC somehow has a duty to follow them. I think that is profoundly mistaken for two reasons. First, there is still a significant audience for radio, particularly among the elderly population, who often cannot get out. They rely on the radio.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I recognise what the right hon. Gentleman says about elderly constituents who depend on local radio. Angela Kalwaites does a fantastic show on BBC Radio Devon covering stories from the county's faith communities. Some of my constituents who listen to her show are frail and elderly and can no longer get themselves to their local church or chapel. They tune in to her programme to get that connection with local people. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that this move would hit some of our eldest constituents hardest?

Sir John Whittingdale: I agree. Many of our elderly constituents rely on radio and are less familiar with online. They will not necessarily go on to the BBC News website or a commercial website. They enjoy the fact they can listen to local news content from people they know well. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead and the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington have both said, this is now going to stop for a lot of the country at 2 pm. We are lucky in Essex, as it is going to continue until 6 pm on weekdays, but after that we will become part of a regional network, with a show that covers Essex, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk, Norfolk, Northamptonshire and Three Counties Radio, which means another three counties, as it says on the tin. So that makes eight counties. Eight counties is not local radio. This will result in a significant reduction in the amount of local content, at times when people want still to be able to access that.

Secondly, instead of providing for local radio, the BBC is going to increase its spend on local online news content, yet that area is already well supplied. Local news publishers more and more are providing online content. Existing print-based newspapers have websites and there are now many online-only publishers, such as Nub News, which I referred to in the questions this morning. They are operating in a challenging and competitive environment, and are under tremendous economic pressure. They already see the BBC, which provides content for nothing, as a major competitor. The latest Ofcom survey showed that, when people want to go online to access news content, 62% go to the BBC website, 34% go to Google and 10% go to any local newspaper site. So already local commercial providers feel that the BBC is a threat and that is why Frances Cairncross said in her report that the BBC needs

“to think more carefully about how its news provision can act as a complement to, rather than a substitute for”

private news provision. Yet this, the area where the BBC is going to invest more, is bound to have an even greater competitive impact on commercial news providers. So I hope that Ofcom, which has a duty to look at the impact of the BBC's activities, will examine that. I hope it will also look at the operating licences for BBC local radio and, if necessary, strengthen them to make sure that they continue to provide genuine local content, not local content across eight counties.

If the BBC wants to support local news provision, there is an easy way in which it can do so. When I was Secretary of State, I played a small part in the creation of the Local Democracy Reporting Service, where the BBC pays for local journalists who are employed by local news providers to collect and distribute local news content across all the local news providers. That scheme has been a huge success. It is welcomed right across all the local newspapers. The BBC acknowledges that it is a great success. So, if the BBC wants to put more money into local news provision, it should do it by increasing its support for the Local Democracy Reporting Service, which works with local newspapers, rather than by increasing the amount of money it spends competing with local newspapers.

It is not for us here or for the Government to tell the BBC how to spend its money, but the message that will go out this afternoon is that the BBC has got this wrong and it needs to think again.

2.58 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The House is united this afternoon as we are the voices of our communities—the very thing the BBC should and must be into the future. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing today's timely debate, as the BBC is well into its consultation. However, when I spoke to the BBC just this week, my conclusion was that it had got the question wrong that it is trying to solve. It is almost running in the opposite direction of the challenges it is trying to address, but also of the way our country is moving.

Ever more we are seeing devolution and therefore more localism and more need to hold local politicians to account. In the midst of the identity crisis we face as a nation, people are drawing into their local roots to find and build that identity. That is the one thing the BBC can do so well because it is not just about broadcasts;

it is also about being in the community. The journalists and programmers live in our communities and know them. They have the connection with the people across the communities. What the BBC is doing with this proposal is drawing everything back to the centre. This centralised idea of what the BBC should be to local people will be determined in London, as opposed to in our communities. That is where this proposal is fundamentally wrong. It asks the wrong question of the problem.

When I met BBC representatives earlier this week, I said to them, “Over the next two years, you should set a challenge to every local BBC station across the country and say to them, ‘We want to move in the direction of digital, because that is where the world is going and we understand that, but we also need to keep a strong broadcasting sector in place. Why don’t you, as local BBC teams, take that problem away, sit around the table, find your own local solutions, and see where that takes us? Let us see the innovation that comes from our brilliant journalists, programmers and staff across the BBC. Let them set the pace for their communities, because they know what their communities need.’” Instead, what is happening is that everything is being sucked into the middle—into the heart of London—where decisions are being made by somebody who does not know our communities, who does not understand the different populations that need to be served, and who does not know the stories that people want to hear.

We have heard about the importance of connection. Across our country, we have 9 million people who are lonely. That is shocking, but the BBC is a friend to those people. We know that 25% of lonely people switch on their radio as a way of making their connection to the outside world. Will we seriously make them withdraw even further from our society as a result of this programming process? It just does not make sense, and it does not address our societal needs, which is exactly what a public sector broadcaster should do.

Redundancy notices, or at-risk notices, have been issued to staff just weeks before Christmas. Forty-eight jobs will disappear across the BBC. They are the jobs of broadcasters and planners—people who worked right through the pandemic and who served us so well over that time. Now they are worried about their future and about having their professionalism undermined, at a time when their advice is needed to shape the future of British broadcasting.

The BBC faces challenges: local radio and local BBC have been massively cut already. Instead of managing that decline, which is what is happening, the BBC should grasp the reality of where it is and where it needs to get to and then rise to the challenge, embrace this as an opportunity, draw in all the skills from the broadcasting community and ensure that it is ahead of the curve. It should be strategic and think about what broadcasting and its unique selling proposition could be, to shape the future of broadcasting across our country. It should be not following but setting the agenda. That is what it did on its inception 100 years ago, but it seems to have lost its mission. That is why I say to the BBC that it is following the wrong course.

Moreover, as we see more and more devolution and more elected Mayors, people across the country are demanding to know more about what is happening in their area. As they need jobs and housing within their

community, they want to know what is happening. It is important that those stories are told. After all—I mean this with no disrespect to friends and colleagues across Yorkshire—people in York want to know what is happening in York and North Yorkshire. They do not necessarily want to know what is going on in Leeds, Sheffield or elsewhere in North Yorkshire, because they are different communities. What matters to them is what is on their doorstep, what is going on in the local school or the local community centre, and what is happening in their city with jobs, housing and so on. That is why local radio is so important.

BBC local radio is also the authentic voice of what is happening across our airways. What happens in this place is almost BBC entertainment at times, but when we think about the stories, we realise that they do not break in Westminster. They happen in villages, towns and cities across our country. Sadly, that is where tragedy happens, too. I think of Claudia Lawrence who went missing in my constituency. Would regional BBC really care about reporting that story 13 years on? Will they keep coming back to that story? BBC Radio York does, however, because she matters to our community and it matters to her family. We need to keep those connections in place—to remember people, to tell those stories, to reflect on the good times and the bad times—and the BBC can only do that if it is located and broadcasting in the community.

In York, we will see a serious cut in the number of hours of broadcast, from 105 to just 47—nothing at all. At 2 o’clock we will switch off from having our own identity and will be merged into the mash of all the media outlets out there. That will certainly not deliver to our people.

I remind the BBC of what happened during the floods of 2015, a really challenging time—we have heard about covid and about other weather event—when day and night journalists were out across our communities, reflecting and telling the story, helping where no other messages were coming through, able to get out vital messages about safety and security, and comforting people at a time of real fear. It sticks in everybody’s mind how they were always there, because the BBC is always there—out in the communities, out in the reaches, telling the stories on their doorstep. That is why we need good, strong local radio, day and night.

It almost feels as though the BBC has lost confidence in itself, its purpose and its mission. I know the people working across BBC Radio York, who do an incredible job, are not just names, but part of our York family. That is why the station is so special and why we must keep fighting for it. Whether it is Jonathan, Adam, Elly or Georgey, they are part of our daily diet as they share what is going on in their own way. Often people say, “Oh, local radio—that’s where people do their training before they get on to the serious stuff in Westminster or move on.”, but in my experience, these are the very best of journalists, the very best of planners and technicians. They know their trade and they are skilled at it, and they have so much to pass on for the future of radio.

That is why it is vital that the BBC asks the real question: what does it want of itself for the future? The only way it can do so authentically—the only way it will have a future—is if it goes back to its communities and its experts across the field and asks them, “What is our future?”. Instead of determining it from here in the

[*Rachael Maskell*]

centre, the BBC must go back and start the process again, determining its way forward by saying, “We need to be part of the communities from which we once came.”

3.7 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I entirely agree with that passionate defence of localism by the hon. Member for York Central (*Rachael Maskell*). Local must mean local and we do not want people in the BBC in London imposing on us their views on how our local radio should be conducted and how big our locality should be. I see behind the centralised planning at the BBC a distorted version of what our constitution should look like within the United Kingdom, and a wish to impose that—against the clear majority wishes of people, whenever they have been asked about these subjects in referendums and elections.

It is not just that the BBC wishes to create phony regional groupings instead of truly local radio, but that it has a very distorted view of devolution. The BBC seems to be an enthusiast for devolution to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but it does not even know England exists. It always wants lopsided devolution. One of the four important constituent parts of the United Kingdom is scarcely ever mentioned; it is never suggested it should have any powers or right to self-government and there is no engagement with English issues on BBC radio in the way that there is a clear engagement with Scottish, Welsh or Northern Ireland issues. That causes enormous resentment.

In my own case, local radio is organised at the county level, at Radio Berkshire. That makes sense, because it is an area that we can recognise and there is some loyalty to our royal and ancient county. Many people now do not know that it had its borders artificially compressed in a local government reorganisation some 50 years ago, under a Conservative Government that I think made some mistakes, but the county retains an enormous amount of goodwill and residual loyalty, and people are very happy for our local radio to be organised at that scale. If people had real choice, however, I think Wokingham would rather have a different radio from Reading, and I think we would probably rather have a different radio from Windsor, because we have a different set of issues. But we accept that there have to be some compromises because talented people need to be appointed and paid wages, and that cannot be done to a sensible budget at very local levels.

I urge the BBC to look in the mirror and understand why, in many respects, it is getting so out of touch with its audiences. It has a very narrow range of views and issues that it will allow people to discuss, and it has a particularly warped perspective on how we feel about our areas and what our loyalties belong to. I am allowed to express views from time to time on BBC Radio Berkshire. It does not put me through the ordeal of a pre-interview to find out whether my views are acceptable and fit its caricature of a Conservative in the way that nearly always happens if national radio is thinking of interviewing me. Then, I always have the double interview, and I quite often fail the first interview test because my views are clearly too interesting or unacceptable, or do not fit the caricature that the radio wishes to put into

its particular drama, so people are spared my voice on radio and I have more free time, which is perhaps a wonderful outcome from those events.

I do not find that my local radio quite plots the drama as strongly as national BBC radio and television. I am very grateful for that because I think that good, independent broadcasting of the kind that the BBC says it believes in should allow people of decent views—not extremists who want to break the law, or racists—to conduct civilised conversations and debates through the medium of the BBC. But all too often, that is truncated or impossible because of the way in which the editors operate and their pre-conceived set of views, about which they wish to create some kind of drama.

Colleagues have made extremely good points, which I will emphasise, about the treatment of staff and the way these kinds of proposals are planned. If the BBC wishes to run truly local services, it must listen to us—the local people and the local people’s representatives—and treat its staff well, and be aware that they have given good service in the past and should be taken on a journey of change that makes sense for them as well as for the BBC. This all looks rather top-down, abrupt and unpleasant. Successful organisations understand that their own journeys, evolving as institutions, are best conducted if, at the same time, they allow good journeys for the staff who give them loyal service. That does not seem to be happening in this case.

I will spare you a bit of time, Madam Deputy Speaker—I have made the main points that I wished to make. The BBC needs to be more open to a wider range of views. If it wants to be local, it has to ask us what local means.

3.12 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (*Sir Mike Penning*) on securing the debate and offer my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for making time available for it. I rise to speak both as co-chair of the National Union of Journalists cross-party parliamentary group and to represent the concerns of my constituents in Easington, County Durham on the vital role of BBC local radio services, and to warn BBC management of the damaging impact of the proposed cuts to those services.

I do not think anyone is disputing that the way we consume news is changing. Undoubtedly, there is a greater emphasis on digital content and listen-on-demand platforms, but many people—especially older and rural listeners—continue to rely on traditional radio broadcasting. It is not an insignificant audience: 5.7 million people regularly listen to BBC local radio services. As many Members have indicated, the plan to reduce guaranteed local programming—much of which is shared content—to just 40 hours a week threatens to undermine the extent to which BBC local radio properly serves the whole demographic with reliable local news and information. Let us not forget, it is not doing that out of altruism; it is part of the BBC’s public service obligation under the terms of the royal charter.

BBC local radio helps to combat social isolation. My mother is 87, and the radio is important. She never gets out, and it is a source of comfort, information and friendship, in a way. It helps people to keep in touch with what is happening in their local communities. Indeed, in the last annual report, as I think has been referred to previously, the BBC boasted how local radio

“delivered real value by keeping people safe and informed through challenging times such as Storm Arwen”.

I can testify to that, because my area was badly affected. The electricity and so on were out and, particularly in the north-east, people were left without power for many weeks. I am grateful to the local radio and the NUJ members who kept people informed. That included some important information regarding health and safety and the distribution of food parcels and other materials. Similarly, during the pandemic many people were isolated in their homes, and the “Make a Difference” campaign brought together volunteers who helped neighbours during the covid-19 emergency, helping to deliver food, to do shopping and so on.

The problem is compounded in my own region. The Institute for Public Policy Research did a report on digital exclusion in the north-east in September 2021. It showed that digital exclusion was a long-term problem, even before the covid-19 pandemic. However, since the pandemic began, there has been increased reliance on digital services. In fact, it was referred to in Cabinet Office questions this morning. In regions such as mine, the older demographic in particular, me old mother, and many other people in similar circumstances are not able to access online digital alternatives. That might be because of a lack of access to wi-fi, to connectivity or to devices, or perhaps because of a lack of skills or confidence. I do not think they should just be put on one side. Inequalities in access to digital and online resources and activities are closely associated with other dimensions of inequality, and in many cases they exacerbate feelings of isolation. Altogether, this suggests a deepening of the impacts of inequalities associated with digital exclusion.

The BBC's report also said that we should ensure

“that digital isn't the only option. The final aspect of inclusive service design with regards to digital provision is the need to offer a suitable offline alternative for anyone who is unable to access digital service for any reason. Digital by default services often do not offer sufficient offline support, meaning that users or customers become very frustrated and often can't get what they need.”

While this debate is about cuts to local radio services, we should also recognise what is happening in much of the other media. The UK has seen a steady decline of local newspaper titles, which we have discussed here and in Westminster Hall. The *Press Gazette* reported that at least 265 local titles have gone since 2005. Members should be aware that the BBC's digital first strategy also plans to scrap or merge the current BBC News TV channel with BBC World News, and then replace both with a single, globally focused channel with the capacity to provide a separate UK-focused feed in cases of major breaking news. Journalists working on the programme feel that this will significantly impact their capacity to provide more in-depth coverage of news beyond the national headlines, especially in the nations and regions of the United Kingdom.

In that sense, the cuts to BBC local radio services are a double whammy for our constituents, and certainly for mine. The NUJ parliamentary group has written to Ofcom to urge it to conduct a review of whether the BBC's digital first plans in their present form would constitute a breach of its charter obligations to serve all communities and localities in the UK with relevant news coverage. Those concerns have been expressed across the House, and to be fair, Ministers have echoed them, although I gently point out that the freeze of the

BBC's licence fee settlement at a time of double-digit inflation invariably puts pressures on the BBC's budget. I would also like to reinforce the point made by the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) that, although we pay £159 for our BBC licence fee, only about £7.60 of that goes on maintaining local radio. That represents, by any standard, excellent value for money.

The BBC says that these proposals are being consulted upon. My understanding from discussions with NUJ members in my region is that the consultation has been very much top-down. As my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said, if BBC management had gone to BBC local radio journalists and asked for their input and advice on how to bring about efficiencies and deliver a more local service, they would have come to a rather different conclusion.

I share the NUJ's view that these cuts will seriously diminish a service that is highly valued by listeners and underpins local democracy. Investment in digital content should not come at the expense of services on which so many of our constituents continue to rely.

3.21 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in a debate with so much cross-party agreement. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing it and the Backbench Business Committee on granting it. I was very happy to put my name to the petition to the Committee calling for this debate, because this issue matters in all our constituencies.

I began today talking to Andrew Easton on the breakfast show on BBC Hereford and Worcester about a national issue, as it happens, but one with relevance in my constituency. All of us, as politicians, need to engage with local radio. I recently ended a career on the Front Bench and returned to the Back Benches, and one of the pleasures of doing that is being able to pick up some of the causes I championed previously. I remember in a debate in 2011, along with the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), championing the case for local BBC and making some of these same arguments. In that case, we did win some of the argument, and the BBC changed its mind about some of the proposed cuts and kept our local radio stronger. I hope that this debate will mean we can do that again.

As a Minister, I experienced the value of BBC local radio scrutiny in every part of the country, not just my constituency. I had to do so-called regional rounds and speak to the local BBC in different parts of the country where different issues would come up with an extremely well-informed approach. I remember being really tested by BBC Cumbria about issues of rural remoteness, and I remember challenging interviews with BBC Three Counties Radio. Having to think, as a Minister, about all the different populations that we are serving and that the BBC is serving is immensely important. That genuine localism, which the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) spoke so passionately about, is vital.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) mentioned certain local government reorganisations that the Conservative party tried back in the 1970s. It is a running joke in my family, because my late father was the Minister responsible for implementing

[Mr Robin Walker]

some of those. They were deeply unpopular and controversial, and most of them have unravelled over time, because people's genuine local identities overcame the centralising instincts of Government. The BBC should listen to the lived experience of what happened with those great reforms of the 1970s and the fact that we have returned to a more local approach and the devolution that the hon. Member for York Central spoke about.

For my constituents in Worcester, that is vital, because we have seen with various regional initiatives over the years the understandable dominance of the population centre in Birmingham up the road of the west midlands. I do not necessarily begrudge that, because it is where the most people are, but the priorities of the conurbation are not the priorities of someone from Worcestershire or Herefordshire. That is similar to Durham—I remember being dispatched on a Department for Education visit where my briefing told me that I was going to Newcastle upon Tyne, which I queried and said, “Are you sure about that?”. It turned out that the school I was going to was actually in County Durham, a rural area where people would not have been happy to be told that they were part of Newcastle upon Tyne.

That sense of proper local identity really matters and BBC local radio does it well. We have voices on the radio that sound like the voices of our constituents—the voices that people know—so I thank the team at BBC Hereford & Worcester for the incredibly valuable public service that they provide. It should be about public service. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington quoted the line about it being one of the “crown jewels” of public service broadcasting and I feel passionately that only the local BBC can do that within the service.

When we have these debates about priorities, I wonder whether television drama is a good use of a huge proportion of the BBC's budget in terms of public service, given that it is an increasingly competitive space. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) made the point about the importance of the BBC providing unique opportunities and I am not sure that it should be putting such a huge part of its budget into an increasingly competitive landscape. I would rather that the small fraction of its budget that it puts into local radio was protected and, preferably, enhanced.

Several hon. Members have mentioned the covid crisis, and we all know the enormous value of BBC local radio during that time. In my patch, we have frequently faced debilitating floods; Worcester falls victim to floods too often. During periods of huge disruption, BBC local radio is vital to many local people. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead made the point about school closures, which is one issue that we have faced as a result of floods over the years. People will not be able to get that vital local knowledge and local input—the scale and the level of detail that tells them when a primary school has been affected by floods and needs to close early—on a regional level.

That local knowledge does not stop being vital at 2 pm, so the idea that we can have local radio just for the morning is for the birds. It is about democratic scrutiny: we as Members of Parliament will all have been asked to go on the breakfast show and on drivetime

to follow up the news bulletins. Although the local news bulletins are being protected, we follow them up with detailed discussions about local issues on drivetime, so to lose those programmes would be a huge mistake.

John Redwood: Is it not important that local radio journalists go to the council meetings, which are not normally before 2 pm?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend makes a crucial point. Of course, our local councils are a vital part of local democracy. Without local radio journalists covering and attending those meetings into the evening, we will not have the quality of democratic debate and discourse that we can and should have in this country.

I was struck by the point of the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington about the BBC chasing a younger audience with its move to digital. We have to ask why, because that younger audience is much more savvy and focused on a wide range of media, and does not necessarily rely on local radio in the same way that the older audience does. It is not just about the older audience, however—although we have heard from many hon. Members on both sides of the House about the importance of local radio to the elderly and isolated, which is right—people who drive for a living also value what local radio does. It gives detailed information about road closures that it would not be possible to get at regional level and that commercial stations can rarely provide. Reaching the audience that local radio reaches—the millions of people up and down the country who benefit from and rely on it—is important.

A good thing about the BBC's proposals is that they talk about investing in investigative journalism, which all hon. Members would support. If that investigative journalism is taking place at a local level, however, it needs an outlet and regular opportunities to report and feed into programmes.

Sir Mike Penning: My hon. Friend is making an exceptionally good point. One problem with the redundancies is that those who have not lost their jobs will no longer be local reporters; they will be regional reporters. Some of the award-winning reporters in our constituencies and on our local radio will be smothered around the country and we will lose that expertise. I do not believe that that is what the BBC is looking for.

Mr Walker: I entirely agree, and I would also say that investigative reporting needs to be done at a local level in our communities. My hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), who has just had to step out of the Chamber, recently had a debate about nitrous oxide misuse, and that really important issue was highlighted by a local journalist working for BBC Hereford & Worcester, based on stories that emerged locally.

At Education questions a week or so ago, I raised the case of Rhys, a boy from Worcestershire who has been unable to get a place in a special school and was not able to get a local placement. Such cases are brought up by the high-quality journalism taking place in our BBC local radio. The coverage we have had of the situation at the Worcester Warriors, which has been very worrying for many of my constituents—not just on the sport side, which I am glad to say the BBC wants to protect, but on what was going on behind the scenes and the business

story of what went wrong at a premiership rugby club that has been driven into administration—could not have happened without the brilliant investigative work of Felicity Kvesic from BBC Hereford & Worcester.

For all these reasons, I think the BBC needs to rethink these proposals. I am very grateful for the constructive way in which the NUJ has been engaging on this—I think we have all had a useful briefing from it. It has shown that it agrees with parts of what is being proposed, but it disagrees with the fundamental move against localism. For local identity and for the vital public service that this provides, I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to keep on pressing the BBC on these issues and to get it to rethink.

3.31 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing it. It is quite clear that this is something on which Members across the House feel passionately. It crops up every few years, and I can recall speaking in similar debates over the 12 years I have been here.

There is no doubt that the cuts proposed by the BBC have led to a considerable backlash from the public, this House and BBC staff, who feel badly let down by the announcement. These cuts will severely diminish what is highly valued by listeners and goes some way to underpin local democracy. My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) referred to his father's change to the county boundaries. He created the—much-hated, I have to say—county of Humberside, and Humberside is actually a swear-word in our part of the country, except when we talk about BBC Radio Humberside, which is greatly valued.

When considering my contribution to today's debate, I reread the representations I have received in recent weeks and realised I could not put the argument across better than a BBC Radio Humberside presenter and union representative, speaking on behalf of the NUJ, Andy Comfort, who has been with BBC Radio Humberside for many years, and much of what I have to say is based on his submission to me, which I received a week or two ago.

The proposals involve scrapping bespoke local programmes and sharing shows between several regional stations after 2 pm. In the evenings and at weekends, these shared programmes will span an even greater region, as has already been mentioned, and the coverage at night and on Sundays will finish much earlier. Currently, BBC local radio provides a vital service of news, information and companionship for its communities. The BBC says it will maintain local news bulletins as they are—on weekdays from 6 am to 6 pm, and at weekends from 7 am to 1 pm—but there is no guarantee that these will be presented from the local area.

This move is part of a wider plan called “digital first”. The BBC plans to move its journalists into local teams and regional hubs. For Radio Humberside, it is largely a positive move, because teams in radio, online and TV will work together and ensure a joined-up approach to news gathering. There will also be regional investigation teams—investigative journalism has already been mentioned—which is very good. There will be more content that airs first or exclusively on BBC Sounds. BBC Sounds is great; I only wish it was not

advertised quite so often—it seems every two or three minutes—when I am trying to listen to a football commentary or whatever.

However, this digital investment comes at a cost to “linear” local radio—live programmes broadcast on traditional FM and DAB radio sets. Across England, BBC local radio reaches 5.7 million people every week. Many of these listeners are not “digitally affluent” and may not have easy access to high-speed broadband or smart phones. They have their radio permanently tuned to their local radio station, so at the touch of a button they are immediately in contact with that friendly voice. It is a friend in the corner.

Mr Comfort from BBC Radio Humberside also points out that regional programmes may struggle to juggle priorities for competing demands for news. If two major stories happen within one region, for instance, which one will the regional programme choose to cover? We also know from the BBC proposals that each local radio station will have an average of just two journalist reporters, whereas at present the average is five or six. This is a serious dilution of journalistic resource in an already straitened part of the BBC's service and output.

BBC management claim that these changes will future-proof BBC local, because traditional linear audiences are declining. The ambition is for all services, but mainly digital, to reach at least 50% of the audience each week. But they are throwing away vast swathes of local output on the radio, highly valued by audiences from all walks of life, but especially the most vulnerable and marginalised in society. Mr Comfort says that the majority of BBC Radio Humberside listeners pay the BBC licence fee and rightly deserve better.

Sadly, local newspapers are in decline, as has been mentioned. In my area we still have a daily newspaper, the *Grimsby Telegraph*, but the local content, like local content on the BBC, is now much diminished. That is bad for our local communities and does not allow voluntary groups, charities, churches and other local organisations to put forward what they are doing for their local communities in the same way as in the past.

It is clear from the representations I have received, as well as from the contributions we have heard this afternoon, that the BBC has once again made a grave miscalculation. I join colleagues in asking the BBC to reconsider this proposal. While we are on the subject, I also urge the BBC to reconsider its policy of imposing the licence fee on the over-75s, which continues to be a sore point for my constituents and, I am sure, those of many colleagues.

On both these issues, the BBC has taken a misstep. I could add another misstep as an aside: the BBC's abandoning of the 5 o'clock reading of the football results on Saturday afternoons, although that is perhaps slightly less significant than the future of local radio. The BBC risks losing public support, which would be a real shame because it provides a vital service that all our constituents value. I urge the Minister to make the strongest possible representations to the BBC.

3.37 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for securing this important debate. Local radio and BBC local radio plays an incredibly important role in our communities. It is the go-to source for trusted news, and to find out quickly what is going on in the

[Dean Russell]

local area. It is also often a voice that connects people who perhaps are lonely at home, or who need reassurance about what is happening in their local area. If we start to make local radio national, we start to lose that connection; we start to lose the voice of the community and that impact.

BBC Three Counties Radio, which I share with my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, is very good at striking the right balance between holding people like us to account while also ensuring that the truth goes out. Roberto's drivetime show is a good example of that. They ask us what the issue is and ask us our opinions, but they also challenge us while ensuring that the facts are put out to local people.

When we are in the Chamber, we often talk about national issues, but actually on local radio we talk about local community matters. I remember talking on many occasions about issues such as the closure of Pryzm nightclub in my patch, or about mental health initiatives that I have been doing. That is important. Local radio gives that platform to speak to people who we will see on the street or when we go out, whether knocking on doors or at community events.

Local radio has another key role: working within an ecosystem to create new producers, new DJs and other people who might want to work in the industry. In Watford we have a fantastic local community radio station called Vibe, and I know that some of its DJs have worked at the BBC. They do that to get experience and for career opportunities.

I will divert slightly to my own passion for radio. When I was at De Montfort University back in the '90s, I and colleagues were involved in setting up a new student radio station called DemonFM. I will name-check Chris North, Jonathan Bown, Emma Marston, Ant McGinley and Rob Martin; there were many more, and we would be here all day if I listed them all. At the time, there was a lot of resistance to setting up the station, but it created a whole load of people who went on to have careers in production and the radio industry. Some went on to work with the BBC or with small production companies who work with the BBC, including at local radio level.

I mention that because, from working on that radio station, where I had my own show, "Dean's Poetry Show"—I was a poet but not many people know it—I learnt about the behind-the-scenes work that goes on. It is not just about the presenters, who do fantastic work, and the news readers; there are also the producers and the people who do all the extra work that we may not see, including those who go out scouting for local stories and work in their local communities to find out what is happening—they watch Facebook posts and other things—to uncover the real human stories that are part of our local communities. My worry is that if the BBC goes with a national approach to local news and local radio, we will lose the humanity in that. We will lose the stories that really hit people in the heart and not just in their head, as it were. This is about the human connection.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned loneliness, which I feel strongly about and even mentioned in my maiden speech a few years ago. Loneliness is one of the biggest challenges facing society. During covid, BBC Three Counties Radio and other

local radio stations really helped to get people information so that they felt they knew what was going on. It was a time of crisis and trauma, when they did not necessarily have friends knocking on their door. As I have said, we used to talk about being lonely in a crowd, and now people in the virtual world seem to be lonely in the cloud. The truth is that radio cut through that. It was an opportunity for people, perhaps while sitting at home or in the kitchen making their dinner, to listen to a reassuring voice.

One of the best bits of advice I was ever given by someone who worked in radio was that, when one presents a show, one should talk not as if speaking to an audience but as if speaking to the listener. That is the beauty of local radio: really good local DJs—we have many of them at BBC Three Counties Radio and our local stations—talk to the listener. They reassure the individual and make them feel like they have got a friend at the other end of the line, even though they are not phoning them. The BBC's measures and the approach that it is taking is wrong because we will lose that. I know that my constituents will feel that.

The sad truth is that, with these measures, people will not know that it has gone until it has gone. They will not realise that it has been lost until it is too late. Such processes and decisions, which are often made centrally, without real consultation and without people realising what they will lose, are never rowed back on. The decisions are made by people sitting in tall towers with very little connection to what is going on on the ground, and that is the sad truth.

I wholeheartedly support what has been said in this debate. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead for securing it and all Members for standing up for local radio today. I wish the Chamber were full so that every constituency could have their voice heard in the way that we want to hear voices from local radio.

3.45 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption.*] Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise—[*Interruption.*] This is live radio. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for securing this debate. What a privilege it is to take part in a debate in which we are listening to everybody from around the Chamber and finding so many points in common.

I am glad to see my right hon. Friends the Members for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) here, because I will start with the bold proclamation that Essex is the greatest county in the whole of the UK, and, as I am sure they would agree, Southend is the greatest city in Essex. Part of what makes Essex so special is its community spirit. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon talked a lot about that. BBC Essex plays a huge, leading part in our community spirit. Only three weeks ago, I was in the centre of Southend for our Christmas lights switch-on with hundreds of people. It was led by Sonia Watson and her team from BBC Essex, on a Saturday night; they went above and beyond to lead the community in Southend.

The points that have been made eloquently about the role that local radio plays in local democracy are absolutely right. It gives voice to local issues and holds us to

account. It is common—this happens pretty much on a weekly basis—that when I put a story on my Facebook page or my website about what I have been doing, I will get a call or email from BBC Essex and will be invited to go on one of their shows to talk about that. The interviews are very good; they are searching. We absolutely have to be able to argue for what we are doing here and why that is important to our local people. That is incredibly valuable, and I pay tribute to Sadie Nine and Simon Dedman, who are two of the journalists who get me on the hook on a weekly basis.

This is about more than just democracy; BBC Essex news coverage is second to none. It really understands the local issues that we are grappling with in Southend. It will be the first to highlight a problem with a flood, an accident or a problem at Southend Hospital, and it puts people's minds at rest when our brilliant police force does one of its Project Servator operations. When it floods an area with police officers, the local radio will inform people about what is going on, so that they are not concerned and know that it is normal, proper policing.

That brings me to something that happened—which we all know about—last year. BBC Essex was absolutely brilliant in its coverage of the horrific murder of Sir David. They were some of the first press on the scene, and they were unique among the press in knowing the community and being able to report on that awful situation that day with sensitivity and authority.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): We all miss Sir David greatly, but the way that BBC Essex reported that and what followed was incredibly empathetic. It really understood the pain that the community in Southend were going through, because it had the reporters and production staff who knew those people and could tune in to what they were feeling. The way it did that was brilliantly commendable. Does my hon. Friend agree that we would abandon that link with our communities through our broadcasters at our peril?

Anna Firth: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend, who puts it brilliantly. Our local journalists really know how our community feels. I pay tribute to them, because it takes time and hard work to get that understanding. The way they handled the situation last year was brilliant.

It is not just about covering sad events. BBC Essex's "Drivetime" show is incredibly practical: it has very helpfully kept my constituents up to date with the dreadful problems on our roads when Just Stop Oil has been causing chaos.

Local radio also celebrates our community heroes. I have always been a big supporter of local media, and not just radio—our local papers do the same thing. It is so valuable. People who do so much for our community deserve to be celebrated. We have already heard about the Make a Difference awards, which BBC Essex arranges every year, but I want to give another example.

We have a brilliant disability campaigner in Southend West called Jill Allen-King, who has done so much over so many decades for blind people and people with sight impediments and the like. She got a Pride of Britain lifetime achievement award this year, but the local radio made a big play of going to her house without letting her know and presenting her with another tribute and another award, because it has covered her work over so

many years. It was not asked to do it. It rang me to talk about it. That is just another example of how it goes above and beyond. Similarly, with the Music Man Project, which we are trying to get a Christmas No. 1 with this year, BBC Essex is joining us and helping every step of the way.

Of course, I cannot talk about BBC Essex without mentioning its coverage of Southend's local football club. Southend United have a huge following, but their matches are not shown on television, so the only way people who cannot go to the matches can hear how their team are getting on is through BBC Essex. One of my constituents, a lovely lady called Annie Maxted, is a big Southend United fan. I met her at our famous centenarians' tea party this year—she is about 101. She came with me to watch the match, and she absolutely loved it because she never gets the chance to go and watch; she always has to listen on BBC Essex. That entertainment, which makes a real difference to quality of life, will be lost if these changes go ahead.

Mr Robin Walker: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that, even if the BBC says it will keep sports programming, the deep connections with and understanding of local clubs that reporters have cannot be protected if the number of local journalists is reduced? We have to take with a pinch of salt some of the commitments that have been made to protect sporting coverage. If programmes do not have those strong local connections, they will not be able to follow sports teams as effectively.

Anna Firth: No, they will not. In Southend, we will not get dedicated coverage, so there is no guarantee that our local football team will be covered on a regional basis. My hon. Friend makes an important point: it is because local media are so embedded in our communities that their voices are so well received and so comforting. It is because of their local connection that they tackle loneliness and provide comfort to our residents. The statistics bear that out: more than 2 million people tune in to BBC local radio and to no other BBC station.

According to the BBC's own listener figures, the majority of the audience for BBC local radio are over 50, with 20% between 55 and 65, and 35% aged over 65. It is the elderly population we have been talking about who really appreciate local radio. That is so important in Southend West, where more than a fifth of people are over 65, and 8% of the people I represent are over 80—a significantly higher proportion than the national average. BBC Essex is a lifeline for them, providing that local, comforting voice in their homes.

Every Sunday between 10 am and 2 pm, BBC Essex journalists go around the county providing cryptic clues to where they are for listeners to solve. The programme is called BBC Essex Quest, and I know from talking to my constituents that it is hugely popular. It is a Sunday ritual for those who are housebound and who may be lonely. That is one of the reasons I was so disappointed by the recent announcements. If the changes go ahead, we will lose Essex Quest, because we will not have that local weekend coverage—we will only have local coverage between 6 am and 6 pm on weekdays—and that will be a real loss to my constituents.

We hear a great deal about the BBC moving its news content online. Of course I see the argument for that, but we must bear in mind—I urge the BBC to consider

[Anna Firth]

this—that only 35% of over-75s go online for their news content. The 65% who do not are exactly the people we have been talking about today, who obtain their news from their local radio stations. I do not want to go into any great detail about the arguments for and against the BBC's increasing its online content, competing directly with the commercial sector at the expense of the hard-working taxpayer, but I do want the BBC to consider the needs of my elderly and vulnerable constituents.

The BBC was founded on the principles of informing, educating and entertaining people, and BBC local radio is the epitome of that. My constituents need a local radio station that is relevant to their lives, and I urge BBC Essex to commit itself to continuing to provide the comprehensive local radio station that they love and deserve.

3.56 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), and I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for securing this important debate. I speak not only as the Member of Parliament for Warrington South, but as chair of the all-party parliamentary media group and the all-party parliamentary group on commercial radio, and I spent all my life, before I came to this place, working in radio.

There is something very special, indeed unique, about local radio's relationship with its audience. It provides companionship, news, information and entertainment in a way that most other media simply cannot achieve. As my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell) said, it is about the voice that emerges from a speaker in the corner of the room and talks one to one with the listener. Most listeners are doing something else while they are listening to the radio—they are driving a car, making tea or in the shower—and that opportunity to be part of a radio community is something very personal, portable and social. Radio is a medium that allows us to use our imagination to build pictures in our own minds in a way that no other medium can.

Local radio has a unique place in our media ecology. It is the space on the dial that jumps out and says, "We are all about the towns and villages that are familiar to you." The travel news talks about the motorway that we are on, not the one on the other side of the country. Local radio features the high street where we do our shopping. It is about the town hall to which we elect our councillors. It is where the daily phone-in happens, when residents can go on air and share their views in authentic accents, using words that only local people understand to talk about the issues that really matter to them. Great BBC local radio stations around the country have the ability to connect in a unique way, providing for their audiences and for the whole community. Commercial radio simply cannot provide that. It is not that commercial radio is not great, but it is not licensed to do what BBC local radio does. BBC local radio has a special place on the dial.

Given what I have said about the unique role of BBC local radio, it is perhaps not surprising that I am concerned to hear about the BBC management plans to regionalise programming content after 2 pm each day, and to share programmes over the weekend. The weekly peak for

many stations is Sunday morning. Why give that away to regional space when listeners are specifically tuning in to find out about their local area? I worry about what that says to local audiences about how much BBC management values local listeners.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of the BBC teams creating local content for Radio Merseyside and Radio Manchester in my area. The Friday afternoon programme on Radio Merseyside presented by Claire Hamilton provides distinctive local content that I cannot hear anywhere else, but it will be lost. On Friday 11 November, Radio Merseyside did an outside broadcast from Tate Liverpool not only focusing on the Turner prize but celebrating the local arts scene across Merseyside. By inviting contributions from listeners, it provided a rounded experience of what is going on in the city and across Merseyside.

The following Friday, Claire was in Cheshire presenting a special programme on the upcoming City of Chester by-election, which included an hour-long daytime debate with the main parliamentary candidates, which is something only the BBC can and should be doing. Last week Radio Merseyside carried a special broadcast on knife crime to mark the murder of Ava White a year ago, and it culminated in an hour-long feature analysing what has changed in the city.

I have heard from many listeners who are worried about losing the friend on the radio they know and trust. I have also heard from people who work inside the BBC, and they are disappointed and angry about how the BBC is treating local radio. They know it will have an impact on ordinary listeners and licence fee payers, for whom local radio services top their list of BBC products.

I was struck by an email from a person who works at the BBC, saying that the teams working in local radio know their listeners like nobody else, "They tell the stories. They laugh with their listeners. They celebrate the wonderful events that take place in the cities and in the towns, and they grieve with them when tragedy strikes. They are the friends on the radio, and that is what is at risk."

Listeners in my constituency have a massive range of stations from which to choose, but no other channel delivers content in the way BBC local radio does. The BBC holds an extremely privileged position as the nation's public service broadcaster, but it is also our local communities' public service broadcaster. The charter granted to the BBC sets out specific obligations and gives it an advantage that no other service provider can match.

First, the BBC has unrivalled funding from the licence fee. Secondly, it has a network of transmitters and streaming platforms, meaning audiences can pick up services on whichever platform they choose, which is a massive advantage over many other broadcasters. Thirdly, BBC local radio benefits from cross-promotion opportunities on the BBC's television and online services. BBC local radio should be growing because it benefits from the wider BBC operation.

In fact, adding national radio, the BBC maintains a 50% market share in UK radio, which is far in excess of its TV market share of around 28%. The BBC is expert in radio, yet it wants to withdraw from local radio. I have shared my views with BBC executives and, in some

respects, I believe the route they are taking will probably hasten the demise of local radio. In every part of the media landscape, the ability to personalise and precisely target audiences benefits a channel. By merging services, the BBC is effectively creating Radio Nowhere, which means audiences are likely to go elsewhere.

Matching cities and towns such as Leicester and Northampton to share programmes makes no sense. Anyone who knows the east midlands media market knows that Leicester, Nottingham and Derby have always sat together—that is the TV region. Why suddenly stick Northampton with Leicester? It makes no sense. Two minutes looking at the latest radio audience tables shows clear evidence that stations that remain fiercely focused on their local audiences, such as Radio Cornwall, maintain the highest market share of local radio in the UK. If you focus on a geographic area and serve it well, you will generate reach and time spent listening—it is as simple as that.

I urge the Minister to read a report published about 10 years ago by one of the UK's leading radio executives, John Myers, who is sadly no longer with us. He was commissioned by the now director-general of the BBC in 2011 to review all the BBC's radio services. Sadly, many of his recommendations have never been taken up and I feel certain, having read that report again today, that it would deliver better value for licence fee payers and would result in more popular, distinctive and sustainable services for the BBC.

I would like to use my remaining few minutes to focus on the independent regulation of the BBC by Ofcom. As the Minister will know, the Secretary of State has already set out the terms of reference for a mid-term review of the BBC, focusing on the governance and regulatory arrangements. This is a timely opportunity to look at the operating licences for all the BBC radio services, but particularly for local radio, which have been reduced and made less robust since Ofcom took over the regulation of the BBC. Having been involved with challenging the BBC Trust 15 years ago, I never thought I would get to a stage where there was less regulation of the BBC than there was with the BBC Trust, but sadly Ofcom has managed to achieve that.

The proposed operating licences being put forward by Ofcom remove a significant number of quotas that are essential for the BBC to be distinctive and to meet its public purposes. The few that remain are 15 years old and not as relevant as they were. Although some of Ofcom's updates to the operating licences are welcome, I share the concerns raised by Radiocentre that the proposed operating licences simply fail to adequately regulate and enhance the current provision provided by the BBC. Strangely, Ofcom appears to have accepted in principle the importance of retaining quotas in order to guarantee a minimum level of distinctive output but then, despite that acceptance, proposes to remove most of them and dilute core elements of the BBC's public service broadcasting. Notably, on BBC local radio the proposal is to reduce the requirements of speech at breakfast time from 100% to 75%, so news output will actually reduce on BBC local radio at the peak breakfast time.

BBC local radio will be less tightly regulated than the commercial radio equivalents, who are providing news and speech for audiences but receive zero public funding. I am pleased that Ofcom proposes an operating licence

for BBC Sounds, as that is long overdue, but it is the woolliest operating licence I have ever seen. It simply creates a situation where the BBC has a mandate to create services to compete against commercial services. I urge the Minister to look at that again. Finally, removing the requirements to deliver niche genre content—arts and religious content—simply allows the BBC to walk away from that as the corner foundation of public service broadcasting.

To conclude, the age profile of BBC local radio is older, with 33% of listeners over the age of 65. Its age profile is less attractive commercially and therefore is less likely to be served by other operators. This is the space that a publicly funded public service broadcaster should be operating in. Most critically, there is a need to update the BBC's operating licences, and I do not believe Ofcom's current proposals are sufficiently comprehensive to hold the BBC to account and to ensure it delivers distinctive content. Frankly, the entire direction of travel by Ofcom, given that the BBC is a public service provider, is to give the BBC more freedom. The BBC receives £3.8 billion from the licence fee and it is not unreasonable to ensure that regulatory conditions are in place to ensure the corporation delivers the public purpose set out in the BBC charter. The services provided by the BBC should be distinctive and should deliver an output that is public service-orientated, rather than simply offering a service that is already provided by other operators.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): On behalf of the Speaker, the right hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) and myself representing Ribbles Valley, I say three cheers for Radio Lancashire. It was great having the team at the Speaker's Rooms on Lancashire Day when they broadcast the early morning programme with Graham Liver—three cheers for him and his team—and we look forward to welcoming them back next year. Hopefully, they will not give me the 7 am slot again—that is an early plea, Graham.

4.9 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate, which was brought to us by the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning)—I thank him for that—and also to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), an hon. Member who actually knows what he is talking about on these matters.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you can tell that this is an important debate, because there are two Norfolk MPs present in the Chamber this afternoon. We have been very competitive about who gets to go last, so I thank you for calling me now.

Local BBC radio in my part of the world is like a cosy cardigan. When people put it on, they immediately have some familiarity. They feel like they know the presenters personally—there is that special connection. That is why my constituents in North Norfolk are so upset about these proposals. The decision to change their local radio programming has really affected the listeners. It is no secret that the older a person is, the more likely it is that they will listen to local radio. The BBC estimates that 58% of its local radio listeners are over 55 years of age, with a near perfect split between both male and female listeners.

[*Duncan Baker*]

As the Member of Parliament with the oldest average age of any constituency in the country, it is clear that, in North Norfolk, we have a very special relationship with our local BBC radio station. A total of 148,000 listeners tune into BBC Radio Norfolk every week. However, that should not be taken as an indication that local radio is somehow just for people of a certain age. Although there are demographic trends, it is also clear that local radio appeals to people from all age groups and backgrounds. As we have heard already in the Chamber this afternoon, it is an astounding statistic that local radio stations, through the BBC in England, reach nearly 6 million listeners every week, which is an absolutely phenomenal number.

From speaking to my constituents, I know just how important those local radio services are to them—whether they are schoolchildren or pensioners. I hear on the doorsteps time and again about how local radio is an invaluable source of knowledge for constituents. They get to hear what is happening, bespoke, locally in their own area, and the service provides an immense amount of satisfaction and joy.

Let me just give an indication of how much Radio Norfolk is listened to. I can remember on my summer tour, at 10 o'clock in the morning, knocking on a door only to be met by a bemused-looking older lady in her Marigolds and with her hair curlers in. She looked at me and said, "You're on my doorstep." I replied, "Yes." "But you were on the radio a few seconds ago," she said. "You're that nice young man with the refugees living with you." She was absolutely right. I had just been interviewed on the radio from my car, and the first door that I had knocked on belonged to this lady who had heard me coming out of her radio as she did the washing up. I rather cheekily said, "That is the kind of service you expect from the Conservative MP from North Norfolk. You merely think about me and I appear."

When we get elected, we are told that journalists are not our friends, but, of course, we all build relationships with our local BBC networks. It is our duty to be accountable, to go on the air and face questions, as many have said this afternoon, and to ensure that we represent our constituents. Across the east, we are absolutely spoiled not only for our radio, but for our television as well. Andrew Sinclair and Deborah McGurran are consummate professionals and fair, hard-working journalists, as a number of hon. Members who have spoken this afternoon will know. The BBC is lucky to have them.

Equally, on the breakfast show on Radio Norfolk, Chris Goreham and his team are superb. I like to think that all MPs for the region form a relationship with those local teams. There is no doubt that they are beloved in my patch, and I put on record my thanks for the way they have always treated me, that includes Chris, Richard, Tim, Paul and Emily, who I deal with regularly. If I am doing charity work, such as marathon running, raising money for local charities or running aid to Ukraine, as I did last month, they always let me go on the show to talk about the work we do in the constituency and I always get a platform to talk about the things I am doing.

That is how the relationship should work with our local BBC. When I ran a North Norfolk promotion to get 100 new apprenticeships into my local area, the BBC breakfast show at the weekend, run by Kirsteen Thorne, set up an entire programme dedicated to getting work opportunities for young people. Again, that was something I never asked for, but we worked together on the project.

I am worried to hear how our drive programmes may well be combined. It simply will not be local as we know it. Under the current proposals, we face having no local weekend breakfast shows, which is unthinkable. In my constituency, "Treasure Quest" is a beloved Sunday morning show that has been on the air for 40 years. If that goes, there is no doubt that the local BBC across my region will have a far weaker product. We know that BBC local music has helped to launch careers for such esteemed artists as Ed Sheeran—even I had heard of him, and I have not got past Dire Straits, so we know it can be a humongous help to local artists who make it big. I feel very strongly about those programmes that are currently on air, but may not be for much longer.

At the end of the day, the BBC is editorially and operationally independent, and can decide how it will deliver its services, but I implore the BBC, which will be watching this debate, to listen to all hon. Members from across the House who have contributed. We have heard some real joined-up thinking and agreement. Digitising and taking away locality of services is not always best for all our constituents. There is immense affection and support for local radio.

We have in Norfolk an extremely rich tapestry of media, and we are lucky to have excellent newspapers as well. I worry enormously about some of the changes and the impact that the dominance of the BBC will have on our local and regional print press, which is already struggling as times change. I do not think we have spoken enough about that this afternoon. I would not like to see those journalists, who work extremely hard, put under even more pressure, when there is a fair playing field at the moment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise for the fact that I was in another debate and could not be here for this one—I had to withdraw my name to speak. In support of the hon. Gentleman, I want to make a quick plug for BBC Radio Foyle, where 36 staff will lose their jobs. Those are the journalists who have come through the ranks. The move will save £2.3 million, with further redundancies expected. The audience for Radio Foyle is almost half a million per week, which in a Northern Ireland population of some 2 million indicates the critical role it plays. Does he believe that there remains a duty of care to the smaller programmes and the smaller stations, to ensure that local people have a local voice?

Duncan Baker: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. He is absolutely right that it is all about having a local voice and presence. For the constituents of the areas we represent around the country, it is absolutely right that they hear what has been said and re-echoed around the entire Chamber: the importance of that localised service to so many constituents, who want it to continue.

I will sum up by saying that I understand that there is change and that it is even healthy occasionally, but media is a fluid landscape. People consume their information

in different ways—that has been incredibly clear over the last couple of years—but there is, and I think there always will be, a very strong case for local radio. It commands an enormous following, as we have said many times, and it is, in many cases, absolutely integral to our local communities. We should not take it for granted, and I hope that the BBC hierarchy does not take it for granted. We should conserve and improve what we have, not rationalise it.

4.20 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): What more could the House want than a playlist of Norfolk MPs speaking back to back? I join others in congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate on the BBC's proposals to cut local radio output. This debate is of great importance to my constituents and those of the Members across the House who have spoken, whose contributions have shown the damage the proposals would do to our communities. This is about the vital issues of local identity, community and companionship.

During the pandemic, we became far more aware of the importance of our local communities, and local radio played a massive role in that, so it is staggering, frankly, that the BBC's response to that growing sense of community is a plan to remove local content after 2 pm on weekdays and at weekends, apart from live news and sport. Instead, content on BBC Radio Norfolk would be shared across a much wider regional area including Norfolk, Suffolk, Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire—all fine counties, undoubtedly, but how can that content be considered in any way local? On Sundays, after 2 pm, there would be only one national show across all 39 local stations. Which licence-fee payers want that loss of local content?

As I said when I met BBC bosses, I do not believe that the proposals reflect the importance that the 147,000 people reached every week by Radio Norfolk place on listening to its output and having properly localised content. Indeed, my constituents from West Norfolk want to see more content about West Norfolk as opposed to Norwich and Great Yarmouth. That is particularly true of the elderly and people in remote rural areas who rely on the radio for companionship.

Retaining only Chris Goreham's breakfast show—on which I am always pleased to be interviewed, particularly about my campaign for a new Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn—and the mid-morning show is wholly insufficient. The proposals would lead to the loss of much-loved shows. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) referred to Essex Quest, and my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) mentioned Treasure Quest, which is a Radio Norfolk institution that shines a light on amazing people, places and events of which people would otherwise be unaware, and it is rightly valued by listeners. But, 15 years after it was first broadcast, Treasure Quest would go under these plans. I made those points to the BBC bosses at the DCMS Committee hearing on these proposals, and they acknowledged that Treasure Quest was a distinctive programme, so I very much hope that they will rethink their plans to scrap it.

The Bishop of Norwich has highlighted the loss of Radio Norfolk's flagship Sunday morning show with Matthew Gudgin and others, which carries important

news, debate, and discussion about and from faith communities. I could go on by listing Stephen Bumfrey, Anna Perrot, the weekend quiz and many more important shows and local content, but I think the point is made.

Of course, people are increasingly going online, and output needs to change to reflect that. I am not arguing against any change, but I encourage the BBC to drop the Aunt Sally argument that it has repeated in correspondence with me—that there will be some who believe that unless every hour of the day comes from each existing local radio base, we will be losing something special. Not everyone is shifting their listening patterns online, so the timing and scale of the cuts in local content are the issue here.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I have been in Westminster Hall, so I have missed most of the debate. Is not the fact that this goes beyond the local content and into the availability of well-trained and professional journalists in each community, like those I see regularly for Radio Orkney and Radio Shetland? They are then available to feed into network news or BBC Scotland, not just on radio but on television? If we keep pulling the BBC presence out of local communities, the news content of the networks eventually becomes ever more centralised and metropolitan.

James Wild: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. We are fortunate to have such expertise in our local news and local radio stations, as well as the knowledge, passion and love for the area they are reporting on, which mean that they can come at it not only with understanding, but with an impartial eye, which is so important.

The BBC enjoys a privileged position with licence fee income of nearly £4 billion a year. That is why it is under an obligation to provide content that is of particular relevance to the area and communities it serves. Ofcom has an important role to play here. Last month, it warned that the BBC

"must not lose sight of the importance of local content."

It said it would keep

"a close eye on programme sharing between local radio stations, to ensure the sustained provision of high-quality local content".

Frankly, that is far too passive, as any action would only come after the event, when the shows have gone and the redundancies have been made. Ofcom needs to act now and look at the operating licences of the BBC.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) mentioned, Ofcom also has a role to play in preventing the BBC from crowding out commercial providers. In west Norfolk, we are fortunate to benefit from *Your Local Paper*, the *Lynn News*, *Town & Around*, as well as commercial local radio from Radio West Norfolk and KL1. The BBC should not use its guaranteed income—guaranteed for now—to undermine commercial organisations by shifting more resources online. The BBC is there to serve its audience—local people; our constituents—and it needs to engage, listen and respond by changing its proposals to protect more local content. These proposals cannot be the final answer. The BBC needs to think again and Ofcom needs to act according to its duties to protect licence fee-paying listeners. Local radio stations, including Radio Norfolk, are assets that we must protect.

4.26 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing and leading it.

The BBC is a great British institution, a cornerstone of our creative economy and an important part of our day-to-day lives. From CBeebies to Bitesize to Radio 4, the BBC has something for everyone, providing round-the-clock news, education, entertainment and culture. It is absolutely right that institutions such as the BBC modernise in an increasingly digital world and keep pace with global media giants, but in doing so, we must protect the traditional yet vital services, such as the excellent local radio network, that make our BBC the world-leading service it is.

Today's debate has focused on the contribution of local radio across our country. From Easington to Worcester to Wokingham, there is agreement across this House that the BBC should review its decision to end local programming on weekdays after 2 pm and secure the future of the local radio network. Given the importance that local communities place on local BBC radio, and the fact that it is an intrinsic part of what their licence fee goes towards, there is concern that reducing local radio content will drive a wedge between the BBC and the public to its detriment. Indeed, BBC local radio contributes a huge amount to each area it serves, and I certainly know that BBC Radio Sheffield does that in my local area.

Everyone across the Chamber has paid tribute to their local stations, particularly the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), who did so poignantly. The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) and others shared the statistic that local radio reaches nearly 6 million people—that is 15% of adults in the UK. First and foremost, it provides truly local news. Although the BBC has provided assurances that local news bulletins and live sport will continue to run under its proposals, the National Union of Journalists has warned that the BBC's erosion of local output could mark the beginning of the end for local radio. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), the chair of the NUJ group, outlined its concerns passionately and in detail.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and I apologise for not being here; I was in the Westminster Hall debate, too. My hon. Friend might be able to help me with this. BBC management has said that the impact of its proposals would be the loss of 48 roles. However, in the Radio Humberside and Radio Lincolnshire regions alone, it wants to close seven staff presenter roles, plus around five other jobs may go in the planned restructure. That is around 12 jobs across two out of the 39 local radio stations. It may be that our area is being hit particularly hard, but if that is spread across all the areas, that would be a loss of around 200 jobs, would it not?

Stephanie Peacock: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and as we have heard in the debate, it is not just Radio Humberside; it is across the country, and I know that colleagues from Northern Ireland have made this case as well.

This is a real concern to local journalists and to listeners, because local radio is such an important part of our lives. Whether it is local traffic updates, school closures or extreme weather events, the provision of trustworthy local news is vital, especially at a time when misinformation is becoming common but hard to spot in a digital world. BBC local radio's news facilities, for example, provided a lifeline during the pandemic, giving reliable and localised case numbers, guidance and vaccination updates for each individual area.

It is not just "breaking news" bulletins that keep people informed. Regular local programming gives people access to the arts, charities, education and cultural events that are truly relevant to them, helping to ensure that each area remains connected to its past and present. The hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) spoke about some of the programmes in his area. It is precisely that kind of programming that faces the axe under these proposals.

The past few months have also shown us how BBC local radio can contribute to the healthy functioning of our democracy, enabling national leaders to be held to account on local issues and local leaders to be questioned by those they directly represent. Regional and national alternatives to such shows simply will not have the same effect, and once these local opportunities are gone, it will be extremely hard to get them back, as the hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell) described.

Local radio helps connect those at risk of digital exclusion to their communities. Although many people, and particularly the younger generation, now access a lot of their media online, there still exists a group who cannot access the digital world. Some cannot get a reliable fast connection due to their location; some were never taught the skills to navigate the online world; and others simply cannot afford the price of a phone bill or broadband. For people in that group—particularly older people or those living in rural areas—truly local programming matters, as the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) described. In a period when loneliness is increasing, now is simply not the time to threaten cutting people off. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) rightly pointed out that many lonely people turn on the radio for connection and companionship when they are on their own.

Of course, we understand the need to modernise our institutions, as outlined by the BBC in the four pillars it set out yesterday. Over the last 20 years, the media landscape has changed dramatically. Indeed, when the last remit for public service broadcasters such as the BBC was created, it was done through reforms to the Communications Act 2003. Back then, online platforms such as YouTube had not even launched, and nor had devices, such as the iPhone, that brought the internet to our pockets. Now global media giants such as Amazon have become major players, and phones challenge radio and TV for our attention. It is due to these changes that the media Bill must be brought forward as soon as possible, with the obvious exclusion of the privatisation of Channel 4, so that our public service broadcasters can continue to cater for British audiences in the modern world.

In the meantime, the BBC has remained competitive in the digital space through BBC News online, iPlayer, BBC Sounds and more. Although these updates and changes are necessary to capture digital and young audiences, they do not need to come at the expense of

traditional services that are still contributing to communities across the country. BBC local radio still has value in today's society, and that must be taken into account. The hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) made that case very strongly.

The News Media Association has warned that the BBC moving its content from radio to online could force competition with local written news from commercial providers, threatening their ability to generate sustainable revenue. The BBC needs to ensure that its modernisation plans continue its tradition of promoting local journalism rather than stifling it. The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) quoted his local NUJ rep, who articulated that.

We recognise that the BBC, by its very nature, must remain impartial and independent, but that does not stop it from making its decision-making processes transparent, to ensure that its plans help create a BBC that caters for all its audiences. The BBC must be clear with the public on what analysis and consultation it undertook to prompt its decision to restrict local radio services and what assessment it has made of the impact this will have on its listeners.

That is particularly important in the light of Ofcom's fifth annual report on the BBC, which found that some audiences, such as those in lower socioeconomic groups, have been persistently less satisfied and are less likely to use its services. Like every other organisation, the BBC must be clear on its best practice for managing cuts to its workforce. Local journalists should not be finding out through the media that over 100 audio jobs will be cut, placing their livelihoods at risk overnight just before Christmas.

Local radio has been at the heart of communities for generations, and this debate has highlighted how important it is for so many people up and down the country. I know that many across Barnsley enjoy and rely on Radio Sheffield. We hope the BBC can review its decision to cut local radio and support the network for many years to come.

4.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Paul Scully): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for securing the debate and the Backbench Business Committee for supporting it. The BBC is a great national institution that has played a vital role in informing, educating and entertaining audiences since it was created 100 years ago. Its charter requires it to act in the public interest and provide distinctive content that reflects and represents people and communities from all corners of the UK. That includes providing, as we have heard, genuinely local content that is directly relevant to audiences.

As we have heard, local services are a key part of the BBC's public service remit and an example of how it can use its licence fee funding to provide services that may be underserved by the market. BBC local radio is one of its crown jewels and remains highly valued by audiences. We heard that testimony in the debate when my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead and my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell) talked about BBC Three Counties Radio; my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and the right hon. Member for

Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) talked about BBC Radio Humberside; and my hon. Friends the Members for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) and for North West Norfolk (James Wild) talked about BBC Radio Norfolk.

My right hon. Friends the Members for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) talked about BBC Essex; Mr Deputy Speaker and my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) even talked about BBC Radio Lancashire—well done to them for getting that in; and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) talked about BBC Radio Foyle, funnily enough. There are so many pairs there—I am wondering which are the Smashie and Nicey of the House in terms of their DJs.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) talked about BBC Radio Berkshire; my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) talked about BBC Hereford & Worcester; the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about BBC Radio York; the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) talked about BBC Radio Tees; and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) talked about BBC Radio Devon. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) was greedy and talked about two—BBC Radio Merseyside and BBC Radio Manchester. Not surprisingly, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) talked about BBC Radio Orkney and BBC Radio Shetland.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) talked about BBC Radio Sheffield. My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester talked about doing the regional round, and I remember talking to Toby Foster in the morning in Sheffield when I was hospitality Minister about the struggle of that sector during covid. I think I still owe him a visit to his comedy club. These things do stick in the mind and we are regularly tested at a local level.

We also heard from the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) about BBC Radio London, which he shares with me and the Media Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), who is unfortunately in her sick bed with covid so could not respond to the debate. We have great presenters and journalists, such as Susana Mendonça, the great political journalist, and I enjoy sparring energetically and enthusiastically with Eddie Nestor often during drivetime.

As we have heard, there are some fantastic examples that remain highly valued by audiences up and down the country. Those local services bring communities together and play a vital role in reflecting local experiences and delivering local news. Developed in the late 1960s and 1970s, the BBC's 39 local radio services in England still reach 5.8 million listeners every week and collectively have a higher share than stations including BBC Radio 5 Live and BBC Radio 6 Music, even though coverage on FM and DAB is not universal across England.

As we all know, BBC local radio is especially valued outside London and the south-east, where there tends to be less competition from commercial services. BBC local stations in places such as Derby, Stoke, Lincolnshire, Gloucestershire, Cumbria and Shropshire have a larger audience share and reach than the average for BBC local radio. The Media Minister has already made it

[Paul Scully]

clear to the House, in answer to an urgent question a few weeks ago, that she was disappointed—we are all disappointed—that the BBC is planning to reduce its local radio output. These are precisely the kinds of services that the BBC is uniquely well placed to provide.

I was also disappointed that last week, as we have heard, the BBC announced proposed changes to its radio output in Northern Ireland, including cuts to BBC Radio Foyle's output. BBC Radio Ulster, including Foyle, reaches nearly a third of radio listeners in Northern Ireland and is a vital part of Northern Ireland's media landscape. Understandably, the BBC's announcement has caused a significant reaction in Northern Ireland, as we have heard, and I know that it was raised by the hon. Member for Foyle with the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's questions on 30 November—reaching the highest levels.

We recognise that commercial local news providers have concerns about the potential impact of the BBC's plans to increase investment in online news services. The charter requires the BBC to consider its market impact, and to seek to avoid unnecessary adverse impacts on competition that are not necessary for the fulfilment of its mission and public purposes. The Government are considering the regulation and governance of the BBC's market impact as part of the mid-term review—my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South raised this issue—and we will obviously bring that back to this place as soon as we can. Ofcom is also reviewing the BBC's online news proposals, including an assessment of the concerns raised by the News Media Association and the BBC's own analysis.

We cannot ignore the considerable concerns that have been raised in response to the BBC's recent announcement—not just today, but in recent weeks. Since the BBC's announcement, my hon. Friend the Media Minister has met the BBC's leadership, and she has expressed our shared concerns in this House. She made it clear that the BBC must continue to provide distinctive and genuinely local radio services, with content that represents communities from all corners of the UK. She also emphasised that we expect it to consider the views of this House when it makes the decision about whether to proceed.

The Prime Minister also committed in this House to raising the changes to BBC services in Northern Ireland with the BBC. The Prime Minister has since himself met the director-general of the BBC, and they discussed the proposed changes to BBC Radio Foyle and the importance of the BBC considering the views of stakeholders when deciding whether to proceed. The Secretary of State wrote to the BBC earlier this week to remind it of its responsibilities under the charter, including the importance of transparency about changes to services.

Last week, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee held an evidence session with the BBC on its planned changes to local radio, and I welcome the important role that the Committee plays in ensuring that the BBC is accountable for its decision making.

Grahame Morris: Would the Minister clarify what the current position is with Ofcom? My understanding is that the Media Minister was going to seek Ofcom putting pressure on the BBC in respecting its obligations under the terms of the charter.

Paul Scully: Indeed, and the Media Minister was actually due to meet Ofcom this morning, I believe, but unfortunately that obviously changed because of her illness. However, she will continue to work with Ofcom to make sure that the greatest pressure is brought to bear on this.

Separately, we have asked the BBC for advice on how it would manage a major local incident—we have heard a lot about flooding today, for example—that requires a dedicated rolling news service, given the BBC's important responsibilities under the charter and agreement to support emergency broadcasting. The latter is really important. At its best, for example during covid, BBC local radio is able to bring communities together. It plays a vital role in reflecting local experiences and delivering local news. It is a lifeline, as we have heard, for many older people living in rural areas, and it is a source of reliable information in emergencies, which is part of its public value.

The Secretary of State also raised the BBC's proposals with Ofcom last month, and it has confirmed that it is monitoring the BBC's local radio proposals in England. In particular, it will scrutinise the BBC's detailed plans for sharing programming on local radio. Ofcom has made it clear that it expects the BBC to continue to deliver for all audiences as it transitions to a digital-first organisation, and will hold it to account in areas where it needs to do more. As I say, we will continue those discussions with Ofcom to make sure that happens.

I want to take this opportunity to stress that the BBC is, rightly, operationally and editorially independent from the Government, and decisions on service delivery are ultimately a matter for it. The BBC agrees with the Government on the need for the organisation to reform over the coming years, and recognises that there will be challenges as the BBC moves towards becoming a digital-first organisation and that those reforms will involve difficult decisions.

Rachael Maskell: I held something back from my speech because I wanted to put it specifically to the Minister. If the BBC were to put the question I suggested to local radio about making its own reforms, would the Minister and the Department step in if it was to build new partnerships, perhaps with universities and other community groups, to strengthen the local position of the BBC and to have further reach but also greater capacity for the future?

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady raises an interesting point, but I would not want to put words in the Media Minister's mouth. I will certainly make sure that she reflects on that, because I do not want to be treading on her toes or to make her decision. I know she will have heard that. I am sure she will be flicking over from BBC Radio London, on her sickbed, to the Parliament channel to hear what is discussed today, so she will have heard what the hon. Lady said.

The Government welcome the BBC's plans, as part of the reforms, to maintain its overall investment in local services, and that includes £19 million from broadcast services being moved to online and multimedia production to adapt to audience changes. The BBC has also confirmed that it is protecting local news bulletins throughout the day and local live sport and community programming across all 39 stations. There will be fully local programming between 6 am and 2 pm, with neighbouring or regional sharing in most of the remaining listening hours. We have heard the difficulties that Members have with that regional

sharing. In Northern Ireland, we understand that the changes will result in local investment in BBC iPlayer, which in itself is to be welcomed. But the recent announcements do appear to fundamentally change important BBC local services, particularly BBC local radio, which is an essential part of the public service remit.

Andy Carter: I heard what the Minister said about weekday services. The point I made earlier was that, on many stations, the peak of the week is Sunday morning, which is a fundamentally important point for audiences, yet that is when local radio is being shared and regionalised. Does he accept that that is a point in the audience day when local radio should be local?

Paul Scully: I totally agree. My hon. Friend has a background in radio and speaks with great experience. The BBC should not be salami-slicing its services. It should be responsive to local need, and that includes looking at the peak times my hon. Friend describes.

We all agree the BBC has been entertaining and informing us for 100 years. We want the BBC to continue to succeed over the next century in a rapidly evolving media landscape and we are clear that BBC radio has a significant role to play in that success. In the light of the concerns raised in the debate, the BBC needs to clarify itself how it is going to manage those long-term tensions between modernising and becoming more sustainable while also maintaining its core public service function and output. I recognise that the BBC faces difficult decisions in reforming its services and becoming the digital-first organisation it seeks, but the debate has highlighted concerns shared across the House about the BBC's proposals to reduce its local radio output.

I stress again that the BBC is independent from the Government, but it is now for the BBC to reflect on the concerns raised in the debate and elsewhere on its proposals. It must also clarify whether it has other plans to change local radio services in future, particularly in Scotland and Wales.

The Government are undertaking a mid-term review, as I said earlier, which will evaluate how the BBC and Ofcom assess the market impact and public value of the BBC in an evolving marketplace and how that relates to the wider UK media ecology, including with regard to commercial radio and local news sectors. That will take regard of the views of this House and the review is ongoing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): A final word, Sir Mike Penning.

4.47 pm

Sir Mike Penning: Words, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank colleagues for giving up their time on a Thursday afternoon on a one-line Whip and that must send a message to the BBC.

Anybody from our constituencies who was listening to this will be very confused because there is not one plan from the BBC for this. There seems to be a mixture of plans. Our area, covered by Three Counties Radio, will lose its local at 2 o'clock. Some will lose it at 6 o'clock. Some will lose it at weekends. Some will lose it altogether, such as in Foyle. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), the former Secretary of State—it is botched. It is completely botched and I am petrified that, once it is gone, it is gone.

As many colleagues will remember, in my constituency, we had the largest explosion and fire since the second world war. When all the BBC national and the international crews disappeared, Three Counties Radio was still there for my constituents. People were out of their homes for over a year in some cases. Some businesses never recovered. BBC local radio was there. Some of those reporters and the teams behind them—the NUJ has done a fantastic job for the journalists, but some of the members of the teams behind them are not NUJ members and we must not forget them—are award-winning.

When Justin Dealey comes on the radio in my constituency, people will listen to him because they trust him. They listen to Roberto—they will do so this evening—and they listen to the morning show. Why do they listen so much? It is not just the older generation who listen: mums listen because they worry about whether their kids are going to go to school. As I said earlier, that is the link with the community. Yes, there are other mediums, but this is such low-hanging fruit and such a small amount of money that the BBC is trying to take out of local radio. And as for telling people they are going to lose their jobs—I agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson): the sums do not add up. From what I hear in my part of the world, the sums of the BBC do not add up. Do we trust the BBC nationally? The public do not, but they do trust local radio.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of BBC Local Radio.

E-scooters: Antisocial Use

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

4.50 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to have this debate today. I understand it may be the first parliamentary debate on e-scooters in this place. I understand from friends in the other place that there have been a number of references down there. The rise of the e-scooter has been a worldwide phenomenon. The global market for the product has been valued at more than £15 billion a year and it has made its mark in the UK in recent years. It is estimated that there are now 750,000 private e-scooters in use in the UK, with the majority being used illegally. The Bicycle Association suggests that as many as 360,000 were purchased in 2020 alone, and we can expect further growth in their use and sales in the UK in the years to come.

Today, I speak to draw attention to an issue that is a cause of much frustration to my constituents: the antisocial and illegal use of e-scooters. While not necessarily isolated to individual areas, Lliswerry, Ringland, Alway and St Julians in my constituency have been flashpoints for this activity. My thanks go to the councillors, residents and even a scout group who have discussed the matter with me. Groups of e-scooter and e-bike riders are careering between pavements and the road, breaking speed limits—I have witnessed that—running red lights, weaving in and out of traffic and causing other vehicles and pedestrians to take avoiding action. As one constituent put it to me,

“the culprits are usually...clothed in black without any reflective items, and have total disregard for the Highway Code and pedestrians.”

In the dark winter months, that is obviously even more of a hazard for other road users.

Ahead of the debate, I received a lot of feedback from constituents sharing their experiences of e-scooters. I want to quote just a few examples. One constituent says:

“They are dangerous, they are on the pavements, and as someone who has a mobility problem I have a problem getting out of there way quickly enough. I am worried that I will get knocked down.”

Another resident said:

“They weave in and out of traffic and scare me to death as they just suddenly appear!”

Another said:

“As someone who is hard of hearing and with no directional hearing, I don't hear them...they are a menace when ridden on pavements.”

Local residents feel intimidated, unsafe and annoyed, not least because the use of e-scooters on roads, pavements and cycle lanes is illegal everywhere in Wales, and there are no designated Welsh e-scooter trial areas. As a Welsh MP, I note that there is some crossover with devolved policy making. For example, any move to extend the UK Government trials to Wales would depend on working with the Welsh Government and Welsh councils and would require the Senedd to amend the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2016. However, it is important to point out that road traffic offences, driver licensing, vehicle insurance and vehicle registration are all reserved issues for the UK Government to address.

E-scooters are rightly classed as motor vehicles when they are legally used in trial areas, which means that the rules that apply to motor vehicles also apply to e-scooters, including the need to have a licence, insurance and tax. At the moment, you cannot get insurance for privately owned e-scooters and as such you would not be eligible to make an accident or injury claim if you were involved in an incident while riding unlawfully on public roads. The Association of British Insurers has highlighted that, if uninsured e-scooter users cause collisions or injury, the Motor Insurers' Bureau must pick up the liability for these claims. The MIB reports that it is already seeing a growing number of claims from the illegal use of e-scooters and there is the potential to incur significant costs, which ultimately may lead to increases in motor insurance premiums for other motorists, which is a really unfair situation. In short, unless they are on private land, no one in Wales should be using an e-scooter, nor should anyone in the rest of the UK unless they are renting an approved e-scooter in one of the 30 designated trial areas. To add to some of the confusion around the law as it stands, several of the trial areas are just over the other side of the Severn bridge from my constituency, in Bristol, Gloucester, Cheltenham and Bath.

Gwent police are doing what they can to crack down on this and have had success in seizing a number of e-scooters engaged in antisocial and illegal activity around Newport. That includes e-scooters, and, indeed, e-bikes and e-motorcycles, being used in drug dealing, which is an alarming trend locally and across the UK. We know that the police cannot be everywhere and that resources are still stretched after 12 years of Tory cuts. Let us not forget that Gwent police saw their budget cut by 40% in the last decade and have been able to maintain a high level of service only by increasing the precept.

From speaking to the police and other stakeholders, there is a real sense that the problem is not a lack of provision for enforcement action, but a widespread and dangerous lack of knowledge about what the law is, particularly among young people. The waters have been muddied further by leading retailers. This week, *The Guardian* reported that Amazon was advertising a new e-scooter model last week as a “commuter companion”. The promotion warned users not to travel on the scooter during thunderstorms, but failed to point out that its use on any British road would be illegal. Retailers need to behave more responsibly. Road Safety Wales and Gwent police have campaigned on that, and I totally agree with them that retailers should do more to ensure that potential customers are fully aware that illegal e-scooter use carries with it the risk of a £300 fine, six penalty points on their driving licence and the potential seizure of the scooter.

The Home Office and the Department for Transport need to do more on awareness, too. It should not be left to individual police forces, whose resources are already stretched, to educate the public. That is one of my main challenges to Ministers: what are they doing to ensure that everyone living outside of a designated trial area knows that they should not be using an e-scooter on a road, cycle path or pavement?

The use of e-scooters on pavements is also a particular concern for those with hearing loss and the visually impaired, who rely on clear, safe routes to travel independently. Research carried out on behalf of Guide Dogs earlier this year showed that 78% of people with sight loss had had a negative experience with an e-scooter,

and that more than 50% had reported changing their behaviour due to e-scooters, including not going into some parts of town, changing their regular routes and doing what they can to reduce their risk of encountering e-scooters.

Guide Dogs also reported that 12% of people with sight loss have had their mobility aid or cane hit by an e-scooter, 10% had been hit but not injured and 2% had been hit and injured by one. The virtually silent nature of e-scooters is undoubtedly a contributing factor. Guide Dogs and the Royal National Institute of Blind People are supportive of the introduction of an e-scooter equivalent to the acoustic vehicle alerting system on quiet hybrid and electric vehicles. This week, BBC News reported that the University of Salford is developing new technologies that might help with that, working closely with the RNIB and the micro-mobility company, Dott. I trust that the Government will monitor that closely and continue to consider options for the sound-related regulation of e-scooters in future.

Sound is not the only problem. As private e-scooters are unregulated, there are no restrictions on their power, weight or speed. Indeed, the maximum speed for private e-scooters far exceeds the capped limit for trial e-scooters. Many privately purchased e-scooters are capable of travelling at 30 mph. Some models, such as one of the models highlighted as a cause for concern by Guide Dogs and which is currently sold out on the manufacturer's UK website, can reach speeds as high as 68 mph. A report by Margaret Winchcomb of the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety notes that even private scooters capped at 30 mph can be modified to reach speeds of up to 60 mph.

Even the rental e-scooters used in the trial areas have a maximum power that is double that of e-bikes and a maximum weight of 55 kg that is roughly three times the average weight of a standard e-bike. The speed, weight and power requirements for e-scooters in trial areas in the UK are also much more lenient than those in place in equivalent schemes in other European countries.

The combined effect of higher e-scooter speed, power and weight in the UK means that these vehicles are significantly more dangerous in a collision, so it is little wonder that there has been a marked increase in crashes involving e-scooters. There were 460 reported collisions involving e-scooters in 2020; DfT figures covering the year from June 2021 to June 2022 show that the number had risen to 1,349. Over the past year alone, the number of people seriously injured in a collision with an e-scooter has risen to 429, with 12 deaths, so there are issues that the Government need to look at now. There is a real need to improve awareness of existing laws among the public.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Jessica Morden: Gwent police and other forces have taken a lead with social media campaigns, particularly around Christmas, making the public aware of the rules for e-scooters before they are purchased as Christmas presents. However, there seems to be little national steer from either the Home Office or the DfT to educate the general population.

I also want to ask what the Government are doing to ensure that our police forces have all the resources they need to tackle antisocial e-scooter use. When I raised the subject in September with the then Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), she told me that her colleagues in the Department for Transport were liaising with the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council on the issue. It would be interesting to know whether there are any updates and whether there is a joined-up approach to enforcement action across the UK.

On a related note, it is also worth asking what steps will be taken to ensure that efficient mechanisms are in place to report e-scooters that are being used dangerously or illegally. RNIB Cymru is just one of the organisations that have highlighted that as a nationwide issue.

I recently tabled a written question on e-scooter specifications. The response from the Department for Transport stated:

"The Department is currently considering options for construction and use regulations for e-scooters, which will likely include requirements for details such as power, weight and maximum design speed."

I understand that the Minister may not be able to provide a comprehensive answer today about specification regulations, but any updates on the timeframe within which we can expect an announcement or a consultation would be welcome.

The lack of regulation and control over the sale of untested and potentially unsafe privately owned e-scooters is a real problem. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) highlighted this week at the Select Committee on Transport, the UK is "falling years behind" other countries because of its lack of regulation on e-scooters, as well as on issues such as pavement parking.

There is also an ongoing issue with transparency and data reporting from the trial areas in England. It needs to be addressed quickly, because the Government have already announced that the trials can be extended until May 2024. After all, these trials are just that: they are tests. At the moment, it is hard to work out what metric the Government are using to decide whether the trials have been successful. It would be wrong for Ministers to press ahead towards legislation across the UK on the basis of scarce evidence from selected areas in England.

As just one example, in its 2020 report on e-scooters, the Transport Committee called on the Department to "clarify how it intends to monitor whether e-scooters during the rental trials are being ridden on pavements and the number of users penalised for this offence, and that it has evaluated and identified effective measures to eliminate such antisocial behaviour." Although the Government said at the time that they agreed with the Select Committee's recommendation, there has been no meaningful update on how those issues are being monitored or whether the trials are working.

It is also worth pointing out that several major European cities that initially embraced different forms of e-scooter trials—notably Paris, Stockholm and Copenhagen—have since partially reversed course and introduced more stringent regulation on their use. E-scooter schemes in Europe are generally far better regulated than the English trials, too: in Germany, for example, all e-scooter users need to be insured, display insurance stickers and use appropriate lights, brakes, reflectors and bells. In countries

[*Jessica Morden*]

such as France, Austria, Belgium, Finland and Portugal, rules of the road for e-scooter users replicate those in place for cyclists.

When I spoke about some of the antisocial behaviour that we have seen in Newport East, I also referred to e-bikes, which many of my constituents see as part of the same problem. Many complaints relate to what appear to be electric bikes, but are technically electric motorcycles—mechanically propelled vehicles with no pedals. It is possible to purchase legal electric bikes, but over the past two years Gwent police have come across only one in the region. The vast majority being used in residential areas cannot be used legally on the roads without a licence, tax, insurance and an MOT. As a result they can be seized under section 165 of the Road Traffic Act 1988, and the police can deal with the rider in relation to any offences found.

Gwent police has had some success in seizing offending vehicles over recent months, but enforcement comes with challenges. For example, local residents have reported that it is difficult to build up an intel picture of those engaged in dangerous driving or criminal activity, given that culprits often wear similar dark clothing, wear face coverings and use bikes that look incredibly similar. All those factors make it much harder for the police to identify the offenders, let alone justify high-speed pursuits. Those are further issues for the Government to look at.

I appreciate that there are other sides to this debate, and there will of course be advocates for e-scooters, especially at a time when we want to shift people from car use. One constituent said to me:

“I do agree they provide very cheap & convenient forms of transport and as usual, it is the inconsiderate riders who spoil it for the genuine ones.”

Another said:

“I think e-scooters and e-bikes are great modes of transport and with zero emissions they are a step in the right direction. However, the way they are used at the moment is dangerous and there should be clear rules regarding whether they are for road use or not and make the users have proper lights and wear reflective clothing.”

What is clear is that we are seeing a modal shift away from cars, a shift that we need to see, and I accept that there is a legitimate case for e-scooters to form part of that mix in the future. However, before pushing ahead with the expansion of their legal use, the Government should be aware of the strength of feeling that exists in communities such as the one that I represent: a view that is shaped by residents’ lived experiences of e-scooters as a nuisance closely linked to antisocial behaviour. Their stance—and that of charities such as Guide Dogs and the Royal National Institute of Blind People which represent the concerns of some of the most vulnerable people in our communities—is that the Government should not proceed with the legalisation of privately owned e-scooters on the basis of the limited evidence available from the designated rental areas alone. Instead, they should look at strengthening regulation, and put public safety first in all their decisions.

Earlier this year the former Transport Secretary, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), said that the Government planned to introduce measures concerning e-scooters in the Queen’s Speech. Those measures never came. A wider transport Bill was also promised, but we learned this week from the new Transport

Secretary that it was unlikely to see the light of day in this Parliament. That sheds further light on the recent response to a written question from my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on e-scooter regulation, in which the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the right hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) said that the Government would legislate on micro-mobility “when parliamentary time allows”.

The Transport Secretary at least acknowledged this week that the merry-go-round of Ministers in the Department had contributed to legislative gridlock, but whichever way we look at it, it is not good enough. I should therefore be grateful if, in his response, the Minister could provide a more substantive update on the overdue transport Bill, as well as any necessary secondary legislation to introduce regulations on electric scooters as a defined form of micro-mobility.

In its 2020 report, the Transport Committee said that the Government should be

“developing and implementing a sensible and proportionate regulatory framework for legal e-scooter use, drawing on lessons from other countries, which ensures that potential negative impacts on pedestrians and disabled people are avoided.”

That still has not happened, and it needs to happen now.

5.8 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I thank the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) for her speech, and for the resolute campaigning and interrogation that she has devoted to this issue for a considerable time. As she and the House will know, this country’s transport system is intrinsically a highly complex and evolving network. There is a constant stream of new vehicles and other technological transport innovations, and dealing with them is one of the continuing challenges for any Government, including this one. It is, however, clear—as the hon. Lady said—that the Government have a responsibility to ensure the safe use of new transport technologies, especially for the most vulnerable users. If those problems are not tackled head-on, and if antisocial and unsafe use is not addressed, the economic and social opportunities that everyone recognises derive from a properly functioning transport system may be lost.

It is also essential, for reasons of public consent, to bring the public along with the policy so they understand that they are being kept safe, as well as being supported, by transport, and to reassure them as the pace and scale of these transport changes, which amount to something of a revolution in electrification and miniaturisation, accelerate. We recognise that the current lack of regulation is at odds with the increasing use of e-scooters. It is essential to ensure that the right regulation, designed to create proper accountability and responsibility, is in place. Regulation, as well as ensuring safety, should minimise burdens on the development of new innovations and new technologies wherever possible.

There was a vivid demonstration of this when the pandemic struck, because there was a clear need to mitigate the impact of reduced shared public transport capacity and to provide a convenient, clean transport option that allows for social distancing. As a result, the Department for Transport accelerated and expanded plans for four e-scooter trials in 2021, in order to go further and faster in that direction. It fast-tracked the

trials, launching them in July 2020, following a public consultation with more than 2,000 responses showing strong support for running trials to gather evidence. There were 17 trials in operation by October 2020, and today there are 27.

Alongside this, the Government introduced clear rules from the start, stating in part that e-scooters must not be ridden on pavements, that e-scooters must be speed restricted to 15.5 mph, or lower where the local authority requires, and that users must have a full or provisional driving licence, and therefore that a minimum age of 16 applies. These rules are required to be communicated to users through an app before they use an e-scooter.

From the start, it was also clear that discarded rental e-scooters would be a hazard to pedestrians, particularly those with visual impairments. The Department therefore empowered local authorities to encourage the responsible parking of rental e-scooters. It is fair to say that we have very successful working between operators and cities, which has helped to reduce the nuisance and obstruction that e-scooters can cause.

Like the hon. Member for Newport East, I am grateful to organisations such as Guide Dogs UK, the Royal National Institute of Blind People and Sight Loss Councils, among others, for collaborating with operators and local authorities, and for the insights they have shared with the Department for Transport.

The Government have extended the trials until May 2024 to ensure they can continue to gather evidence on what does and does not work, which is the reason for having such a wide range of trials and such a wide range of scope for regulatory and other innovations. The evidence and learning from these trials will be published shortly.

I am mindful that technology and incentives alone cannot tackle antisocial use. There will always be some antisocial use of any mode of transport, which comes with the turf. As the hon. Lady knows, Wales chose not to participate in the trials, and so by default any e-scooter ridden on public roads in her constituency is illegal. Most micro-mobility vehicles, including e-scooters, are currently classed as motor vehicles and must meet the wide range of requirements built into the current legislation.

The hon. Lady asked about the joining up of enforcement, and my Department is in regular contact with the National Police Chiefs' Council and the Home Office to ensure a consistent approach to tackling this issue. We continue to support the police to ensure they have the tools they need. The House will recall that a full suite of offences can apply to e-scooters relating to speeding, dangerous driving and drink and drug driving, as well as to licensing and insurance. Users have been fined up to £300, had their vehicle impounded and had up to six points put on their driving licence, so a driver who recently passed their test could lose their licence if caught riding a private e-scooter.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister refers to the powers that the police have. Does he have any statistics available to show how many offences have been recorded and what punishment has been handed out? It is probably fair to say that that is rather limited.

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will be aware, the police publish statistics on crimes and offences. It is important to say that this will differ by region and by

the priorities for the police forces in question. We have devolved police forces and they are not accountable directly to Government; they set their own priorities. In Wales, they may choose to set priorities that decide that any e-scooter ridden on roads there is illegal and then fine people and take appropriate enforcement action on that basis. The same will be true in other parts of the country, depending on the specifics of the police force's own priorities. The key point is that when they reach for those enforcement mechanisms, they will find one of most established and strictest regulatory suites of enforcement rules and requirements anywhere in the world.

There is not a great deal of time left in this debate, so let me say that our current regulatory regime on micro-mobility is a symptom of the rapid evolution of the market. It is important to recognise that UK retailers also have a duty to advise their customers of the law and to ensure that those customers do not unknowingly take the law into their own hands. The hon. Lady gave the example of one particular online retailer, but this week I have written to retailers reminding them of the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency's continuing market surveillance work in this area, specifically in relation to the marketing that the retailers have put online, and their duties on advertising and the accurate provision of information. That, too, is an important way of assisting a crackdown on illegal and irresponsible use.

Since setting up the trials, we have had 31 million journeys on e-scooters, with the vast majority being completed safely. It is important to see these in some form of context. Nevertheless, there have sadly been four deaths in the trials, the most recent of which was the tragic death in Birmingham on Tuesday morning. I am following the detail of that case closely and will be ensuring that we learn lessons from this terrible incident. I extend my condolences and those of the Department to the family of the person involved. I am sure that the House will understand that it would be inappropriate for me to comment further while the police investigation is under way.

We have also already implemented some early learning from the trials. In February, the Government set out further guidance for the rental trials on minimum training, further encouragement of helmet use, mandating unique identification numbers and reducing illegal behaviour. Following that, the private sector trial operators have risen to the challenge and started to provide innovative solutions. They include things such as credits for 'helmet selfies', app-based safety quizzes or compulsory reaction tests after 10pm in an attempt to cut down on drink-riding. Outside the trials, we know that there are safety concerns surrounding the illegal use of private e-scooters on our roads too. Between July 2021 and June 2022, there were 1,437 casualties recorded in collisions on the public highway involving both rental and illegal private e-scooters, with 12 killed. That goes to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers). We also know that it is not just e-scooter riders getting hurt; of those 1,437 casualties, 342 were other road users, and of the 12 fatalities one was a pedestrian. So the clear need for enforcement activity is evident.

Let me wind up quickly. We need to find a balance between the conflicting requirements. No one wants an unregulated free-for-all, as that would be unsafe for our communities.

Jessica Morden *rose*—

Jesse Norman: I just do not have any time. I cannot respond to the hon. Lady's speech if I do not—

Jessica Morden You have 12 minutes.

Jesse Norman: In that case, I am happy to take the intervention, of course.

Jessica Morden: I would be grateful if the Minister just addressed the issue of the transport Bill and any secondary legislation that is planned by the Government. Will he give us an idea of what is planned in a transport Bill and when we might see it, and of any secondary legislation relating to some of the things we have learnt from the trials?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I do not think that I can do better than my colleague, the Secretary of State, in his comments to the Transport Committee, and I do not think that this would be an appropriate place for an impromptu announcement, even if I had one, in this area. I understand her concern and I share it. We, too, want to take vigorous action not just in this area, but in several other areas of transport. We recognise the public concern, and we also recognise the economic and business benefits from effective, early legislation.

As I was saying, Mr Deputy Speaker, the point here is that we need to find a balance in the way that we regulate. An unregulated free-for-all is unsafe for communities, and, in the long run, bad for businesses, as public policy follows, potentially, a cycle of reactions to faltering consumer confidence and real-world safety impacts. We do not want to be in a position where laws trail behind, to the extent that UK businesses are forced to launch innovations abroad and our transport users' needs and wants are unmet.

Jessica Morden: Does the Minister accept that other European countries are much further ahead than us in looking at what regulations we might need with e-scooters in a whole range of specifications, such as speed and so on? Does he accept that we are far behind them and

therefore there is a need to legislate quickly, or to look at this quickly, rather than to leave it to drag on if there is no transport Bill?

Jesse Norman: I am afraid that I do not accept that, no. The facts of the matter are that some other countries have decided to change their regulations because they had launched the wrong set. They have re-regulated in certain cities, and some countries have not even permitted any trials of e-scooters, so I do not accept that. Indeed, in general in this country, we have a remarkably flexible, open and innovative transport sector. One can see that in the use and trial of autonomous vehicle technologies, in the use of zero emission vehicles, in the ways that electric vehicles are being brought into the market in the UK, and in the speed and development of that market. Therefore, I do not accept that point.

However, we do need a flexible and fully enforceable regulatory framework that allows Government and agencies of Government to manage the balance that I have described and to handle the different challenges faced by cycles and motor vehicles. That is why we announced at the Queen's Speech our intention to bring forward primary powers, as the hon. Lady has mentioned. However, this is a complex area, and the Government are still developing requirements for e-scooter use and are continuing to gather the evidence. There is an enormous amount of evidence being brought forward from the trials. The trials are diverse in the way that they address these issues. That is deliberate and it allows more testing of different contexts, different outcomes and different technological and behavioural responses, and that is a valuable thing.

The goal throughout is to ensure that we tackle anti-social behaviour, learn from the trials, encourage take-up and also support the active travel and decarbonisation agendas. If we are properly able to manage that, e-scooters may well be able to take their place alongside the other technologies that are in place, but it is not appropriate to pre-judge the results of the consultation that we will be launching in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

5.23 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 8 December 2022

[DAME MARIA MILLER *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

International Human Rights Day

1.30 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered International Human Rights Day 2022.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting today's debate to mark International Human Rights Day, which this year falls on Saturday 10 December, and I thank my parliamentary colleagues who supported the application, as well as those here to participate. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary human rights group—PHRG—it is a great honour to open the debate. The APPG works cross-party to raise greater awareness, both in Parliament and more widely, of serious human rights violations taking place across the world; to press for reform and redress; and to amplify the voices of those at the grassroots, including victims—or, as many prefer to be called, survivors—and human rights defenders working on behalf of affected communities. I strongly believe in the importance of an annual international human rights day.

Given the continued prevalence of authoritarian regimes and Governments who commit, facilitate or turn a blind eye to serious human rights violations, and of abuses committed by non-state actors such as terrorist entities and criminal groups, it remains as necessary as ever to highlight the universal applicability of fundamental rights—political, civil, economic, social and cultural—to everyone everywhere in the world.

We can sometimes take our rights for granted, or underestimate the impact of human rights abuses on communities, families and individuals, the vast majority of whom are peaceful and simply wish to live a life free from fear. When I hear about people arbitrarily detained, harassed, persecuted, brutally tortured or disappeared for trying to exercise their right to free speech, to protest or to join a trade union, or who are being discriminated against because of their ethnicity or religion, I wonder: what if that had been me, a member of my family, a colleague or a friend?

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I want to support this debate, although I have a British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly meeting that will prevent me from contributing further. May I, through the hon. Lady, recommend that people go to the Upper Waiting Hall to see the display by PEN and Amnesty, and to learn about the journalists who were arrested and herded up 21 years ago in Eritrea? There, Members can see an illustration of how we cannot know what is going on in some countries, because those who could tell us—trade unionists, journalists, people in opposition and people

in the Government who object to what is going on—cannot have a voice. We have to be a voice for them and watch out for them.

Margaret Ferrier: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I will mention that display later.

There are those languishing in a crowded, filthy prison after an unfair trial, those being prosecuted simply for peacefully protesting about Government policy, and those who have had someone close to them killed for their political or social activism. I want them to be offered the same help, support and solidarity that I would fight to have provided to someone close to me. Today, I hope that we can, using the parliamentary platform that we are privileged to have, provide some support to victims, and to human rights defenders across the world, who often risk their personal safety to champion the rights of their community. I want to take this opportunity to express my concern about the human rights situation in a number of countries on which I have been focused for some time—countries in the middle east and north Africa, as well as Zimbabwe.

The situation in a number of Gulf Co-operation Council member states and Iran remains challenging. As I am sure colleagues are aware, I remain very concerned about serious human rights violations in Saudi Arabia by the state, which, according to the latest annual report from Human Rights Watch,

“relies on pervasive surveillance, the criminalization of dissent, appeals to sectarianism and ethnicity, and public spending supported by oil revenues to maintain power.”

I remain unconvinced by Saudi Arabia's recent attempts to project a more modern and progressive image, including through glossy advertisements that try to entice tourists to holiday there. Most recently, since 10 November, while the Saudi regime thought that the world's attention was elsewhere because of the World cup, the execution of those sentenced to death has resumed. Many of those killed were convicted of non-violent drugs offences, for which the Saudi Government had committed not to execute people. Some were Saudi nationals, but others were foreign nationals from Pakistan, Syria and Jordan. This latest wave of executions follows the execution of 81 people in a single day on 12 March 2022.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am glad that the hon. Lady mentioned Saudi so early in her speech. Would she agree that one of the problems with taking action on Saudi is that the Government adopt double standards here? There was a perfect example of that last week. Responding to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) on the case of Hussein Abo al-Kheir, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), said:

“clearly torture was used. We find that abhorrent.”—[*Official Report*, 28 November 2022; Vol. 723, c. 673.]

He then made a ministerial correction to *Hansard*, in which he changed that to:

“in which torture has been alleged.”—[*Official Report*, 2 December 2023; Vol. 723, c. 12MC.]

That is not a ministerial correction; that is tailoring one's words to suit a barbaric regime.

Margaret Ferrier: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the intervention. We have to be strong when we speak out against human rights abuses; there is no doubt about it. The Government say that they speak privately with nations all over the world.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Before we move off this point, the worst of it is that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has now admitted that it made the ministerial correction because Saudi Arabia asked it to. We cannot have Saudi Arabia telling Parliament what to do about human rights, surely.

Margaret Ferrier: I could not have put it better. The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. We should not allow Governments other than the UK Government to say what the right response is. I thank him for the intervention.

Over 50% of those executed were convicted on the basis of their participation in pro-democracy demonstrations back in March. As executions are confirmed only once the death sentence has been carried out, we do not know how many people are on death row in Saudi Arabia. That is also the case in China, North Korea, Vietnam, Egypt and Iran. I will speak about the latter two shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I understand that between 500 and 600 people have been executed in Iran in the past year, so if there is a country that is top of the league, and really has to be brought to book, Iran is that country.

Margaret Ferrier: I will come on to speak about Iran; the figures that we hear are shocking.

I say this to the Saudi regime: the world is watching, and will continue to call it out on these executions, particularly when the offences are considered not to be the most serious, or are non-violent or involve juveniles, and when the sentence follows a manifestly unfair prosecution. This is, of course, a violation of the most fundamental right: the right to life.

That brings me to the Saudi criminal justice system, which remains opaque. We know that international fair trial standards are not generally upheld there, and there are credible allegations that some of the accused are tortured to make them sign confessions. Of course, we must not forget the brutal and brazen killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018, which US intelligence concluded, with a medium to high degree of certainty, had been carried out on the orders of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. I truly hope that one day, there will be real accountability for that heinous murder.

Lastly on Saudi Arabia, I highlight the case of imprisoned human rights defender Mohammed al-Qahtani, who is reportedly being kept incommunicado after his family filed a complaint about attacks on him by inmates. Al-Qahtani is a founding member of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, which was dissolved in 2013. That year, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison for allegedly providing false information to outside sources, including UN human rights mechanisms.

Like Saudi Arabia, Iran continues to be one of the world's leading implementers of the death penalty, as we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The death penalty is used for such acts as

insulting the Prophet, apostasy, same-sex relations, adultery, drinking alcohol and certain non-violent drug-related offences, although some drug-related offences are now meant to be exempt. Iranian courts, particularly revolutionary courts, regularly fall far short of providing fair trials, and use confessions likely obtained under torture as evidence in court.

I am sure other colleagues will speak to my next point, so I will limit my remarks about the widespread protests in Iran, following the death in September of Jina Mahsa Amini in detention. She was arrested by Iran's so-called morality police for not wearing her hijab properly. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights highlighted that Iranian security forces, "notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basij forces have used live ammunition, birdshot and other metal pellets, teargas and batons" against protesters. An estimated 300 people were killed and 15,000 arrested.

Turning to human rights defenders at risk, imprisoned human rights defender Arash Sadeghi has been jailed on multiple occasions for his activities in defence of human rights, and was arrested again on 20 October 2022 for unknown reasons. He has been placed in indefinite detention, and his health is deteriorating. I echo the calls for his immediate release. One of the cases featured in Amnesty International's "Write for Rights" 2022 campaign is that of Vahid Afkari, who remains in solitary confinement following unsafe and highly questionable convictions. His brother Navid was sentenced to death on similar charges and secretly executed in September 2020, sparking international outrage.

I will continue with this focus on the middle east, but move on to Bahrain. In common with many others, I remain open to constructive engagement with the relevant Bahraini authorities and those in Bahraini civil society, who work under very difficult conditions. However, I am worried that in the longer term, the country's stability will be undermined by increasing polarisation, due at least in part to multiple allegations of human rights violations, including against those widely deemed to be political prisoners. I remain concerned that despite some welcome releases under the alternative sentences law, a number of political prisoners, such as Hassan Mushaima, Dr Abduljalil al-Singace and Sheikh Ali Salman, remain in Jau prison. Quite simply, they should not be in jail, and I join calls for their immediate release.

I urge the UK Government to play a more positive role that is not limited to giving support to oversight bodies in Bahrain, but that instead extends to encouraging and assisting the Bahraini Government in taking such confidence-building measures as, in particular, the release of political prisoners and the initiation of meaningful political dialogue.

I also highlight the exploitative practices against migrant workers, which has come under the spotlight with the building of infrastructure for the World cup in Qatar. The kafala system is the framework that defines the legal status of most migrant workers in the Gulf region, Jordan and Lebanon. Workers are often recruited on time-limited contracts to work for a specific employer. Although there have been welcome changes to the conditions applicable to migrant workers in most Gulf Co-operation Council countries, such as a move to allowing workers to change employers more easily, these reforms can be hard to enforce, and worker protests may result in deportation.

Workers also often still face poor working and living conditions, overt racism and debt bondage. Difficulties continue to beset many migrant domestic workers, who may not benefit from labour laws, including in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Lebanon. They can reportedly face the most abuse, and can be victims of sexual violence. Many women choose not to report these serious violations for fear of losing their job or even being charged with a crime; some women have been prosecuted for having extramarital sex, even in cases of alleged rape.

I am aware that my time is limited, so although I could speak about the middle east all afternoon, I will now briefly highlight concerns in north Africa, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia. Egypt is sadly yet another country where the death penalty is carried out, often after manifestly unfair trials, and many people are arbitrarily detained, often in very poor conditions. There was some media coverage of that in the run-up to COP27.

I make a special plea to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to do all it can to secure the release of British-Egyptian dual national, Alaa Abdel-Fattah, as well as his lawyer, Mohamed el-Baqer, who are among thousands unjustly imprisoned in that country. I can only agree with Amnesty International that Egypt's adoption of a national human rights strategy is completely disconnected from the reality on the ground. I trust that no one will be taken in by that cynical propaganda exercise.

Turning to the country that was pivotal to what, at the time, was referred to as the Arab spring, it is very sad to see the democratic backsliding that we have witnessed in Tunisia in the last 18 months. It follows what was effectively a coup by President Saied, who suspended Parliament, removed the immunity of parliamentarians, dismissed the Prime Minister, removed other high-level officials from their positions and assumed oversight of the office of the public prosecutor.

Although there had been political deadlock in Parliament and a deteriorating economic situation, which has not since improved, the way forward for Tunisia cannot be a return to authoritarianism, and President Saied cannot be viewed as the country's saviour. According to the presidential road map, there are to be parliamentary elections next week, but they are very unlikely to be free and fair, the President having been given wide-ranging powers before, during and after the vote. It is feared that Parliament will be reduced to a consultative body at best, and will be there to effectively rubber-stamp decisions by the Executive.

In addition, the Tunisian Parliament is going backwards when it comes to female representation. Whereas it had been a beacon for gender equity in the region, a new law introduced in September strips gender parity provisions from a previous electoral law aimed at ensuring more gender equality in elected assemblies.

Finally, I come to the situation in Zimbabwe. I ask that the UK Government pay special attention to it in the run-up and aftermath of the elections that are due to be held next year, given that past elections have been the catalyst for violence and serious abuses. I continue to urge accountability for the assaults, mistreatment and ongoing persecution of three Opposition politicians from the Movement for Democratic Change Alliance: Cecilia Chimbiru, Netsai Marova, and Member of Parliament Joana Mamombe. They were abducted from police custody by suspected state agents for taking part in a protest in Harare, and are being prosecuted,

unbelievably, for making false reports about their abduction. That is another case featured in Amnesty's "Write for Rights" campaign 2022. Joana's case has been taken up by the Inter-Parliamentary Union's committee on the human rights of parliamentarians, which in 2021 dealt with the cases of more than 600 MPs from 44 countries whose rights had been violated.

Though I have focused on the challenges we continue to face in ensuring respect for human rights globally, I would also like to take the time to highlight the positive impact on the ground of human rights defenders, whom the PHRG is privileged to meet regularly, and organisations such as the UN. Recently, we have been delighted to host the UN special rapporteur on human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor; the Council of Europe; Amnesty International; Human Rights Watch; Peace Brigades International; Reprieve; and Redress, among many others. Their work, and our work here, truly does make a difference. The arbitrarily detained, such as Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, Anoosheh Ashoori and other dual nationals in Iran, are released; those at risk are better protected; and miscarriages of justice are overturned.

One of my small victories this year was the release on humanitarian grounds of a British national in a United Arab Emirates prison. He remained in detention even though he had received a pardon from the King and had served his original sentence. The resilience of this man is unparalleled, and his ability to remain optimistic despite all he went through during his detention is inspiring. I was delighted to finally meet him in person here in London following his release. It was a real reminder of why continued work in this space is so essential, and of the impact that can be had. That work would not have been possible without the help and support of Nicole Piché, secretariat for the PHRG, and the FCDO. That man is now fighting for better medical care for other foreign prisoners in the UAE, to give those he had to leave behind much support that is not otherwise available. I follow his work as he continues with this fight, and feel immensely grateful for the fact that, owing to his release, he is now able to lend his voice to the voiceless.

I want to close by thanking both former and present FCDO Ministers and officials for their positive engagement with the PHRG, and their representations and action on human rights cases. They will be all too familiar with our regular correspondence on various cases, but there is always more that can be done, including on the many issues that I have raised today. I ask the Government to resume publishing their annual human rights report and releasing their human rights updates, as the last one appears to have been published in July last year. The reports provide a useful summary of the action undertaken by the FCDO and are a demonstration of the UK Government's ongoing commitment to the international human rights framework.

I have only spoken about a small number of countries with worrying human rights records. So many people across the globe—both those whose names we know, and those whose names we do not yet know—are relying on the support of those of us who have the freedom to speak out on their behalf.

Andy Slaughter: I want to add one further example, although we could add many: human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which are getting worse

[*Andy Slaughter*]

every year, particularly through state-sanctioned settler violence. I pay tribute to Yachad and B'Tselem, which brought an exhibition on that issue to Parliament this week. Occupation adds another level of illegality and abuse to human rights, and it is right that it be called out. I entirely agree with the hon. Lady that the Government have to publish their findings more regularly if people are to be held to account.

Margaret Ferrier: I attended that drop-in, and it was shocking. I advise all Members to look at the report.

Every person, Member of Parliament, Government Minister and member of the public alike can take some form of action, be it by writing letters for campaigns such as Amnesty International's "Write for Rights", or just by raising awareness within our own social circles. I strongly encourage every person listening today to use their voice, so that those without can be heard.

1.52 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. Today, as we mark Human Rights Day, I want to focus initially on article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, which states that everyone should have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.

Right across the world, people are losing their jobs, education, homes, livelihoods, land, families, freedom, access to justice and even life itself simply on account of what they believe. People are being discriminated against, threatened, marginalised, beaten, tortured and killed, too often by their own Governments—the very Governments who have a duty to protect people's freedom of religion or belief. That freedom is important, not least because it is so closely connected to other rights such as the right to life, assembly and expression as well as other social, economic and cultural rights.

No one should face discrimination, hatred or violence simply because of what they believe, yet, in the 21st century, millions do. They include Zhang Zhan, a young woman and Christian citizen journalist from China. She is a human rights defender who in 2019 bravely attempted to report the truth during the early days of the covid-19 pandemic. She travelled to Wuhan while everyone else fled, and posted articles on social media. She spoke up against the authorities' abuse of human rights and was arrested in May 2020. Prior to her court hearing in December of that year, she was reportedly force-fed, tortured and put in a tiger chair, and her health dramatically deteriorated. She was sentenced to four years in prison, having been charged with picking quarrels and provoking trouble—a charge regularly levelled at Chinese lawyers, activists and journalists.

Zhang's lawyer visited her and recounted her words at the time of her trial. She said:

"I want to stand firm in my faith and do what I believe to be right before God. I cannot accept lies nor deceit and I'm even more unwilling to coexist with darkness."

I often think about Zhang Zhan's suffering in a Chinese prison, because she was sentenced in the same week that I was appointed by the Prime Minister as the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief.

Another prisoner, who has suffered for years, is Shamil Khakimov. He is at the other end of his life, at 71. He is a Jehovah's Witness in Tajikistan. In 2019, as a result of

the peaceful exercise of his religious beliefs, he was convicted of inciting religious hatred and sentenced to seven and a half years in a strict regime prison. He was ill when he entered prison. He now suffers from heart and eye problems, and has gangrene in his leg and other health problems. There is a real danger that his term of imprisonment will effectively become a death sentence.

Last year, Mr Khakimov was adopted as a religious prisoner of conscience by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, and the UN Human Rights Committee also requested that Tajikistan

"ensure, without delay, that Mr. Khakimov receives adequate medical treatment".

This November, the 42 countries that form the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which I have the privilege of chairing, took up his case. I am very pleased to say that he has now been given three hearings, including one in which the prisoner doctor testified that the prison cannot give him the care that he needs. Let us hope that that joint advocacy secures for him the treatment he needs, and that he will be moved before it is too late. It is joint advocacy that is so effective in such cases.

Another concerning case is that of a 24-year-old young woman, Hanna Abdirahman Abdimalik. She was sentenced in August this year to five years' imprisonment simply for becoming a Christian and was reported to the authorities by her own family. The specific charges were insulting Islam, disturbing religious functions and public incitement. Her lawyer was not even informed of when the verdict would be issued, and therefore was not present in court. Once again the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, alongside other multilateral organisations, has taken up her case, and I am pleased to say that an appeal against her sentence was heard just last week, on 27 November. The outcome is now awaited and I hope that she will be released.

Where they still exist, offences related to blasphemy or apostasy can result in significant prosecution, either by states or communities. Concerted advocacy across the human rights family is needed to change that. In 2022, there are still 12 countries with criminal blasphemy laws for which a person can be sentenced to death. Countries including Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Brunei, Mauritania and Saudi Arabia have the death penalty for blasphemy—individuals defying or simply criticising the prevailing religion of their country. Our alliance has been supporting the efforts at the UN General Assembly of two of our member countries, Australia and Costa Rica, to call for a moratorium on the use of the death penalty for these offences. It is hoped that that may pave the way for global abolition. I urge all those listening to support those endeavours, and I trust that the UK Government will do all they can to support the relevant resolutions at the forthcoming UNGA plenary session.

Tragic cases such as the following should not occur in the 21st century. Mubarak Bala, about whom we have spoken in this Chamber before, is an atheist and president of the Nigerian Humanist Association. This year, he was imprisoned for 24 years for charges in relation to blaspheming Islam. Let us hope his appeal succeeds. The couple Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel were kept on death row in Pakistan for six years until this year. They were accused of sending blasphemous texts via a SIM card that had been obtained by someone using a duplicate of Kausar's national identity card. Thanks to international advocacy, they were ultimately

released, but only because the courts finally accepted that they could not possibly have sent the text messages because neither of them can read or write.

Consider the situation of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu. He is a young Nigerian Sufi musician—a singer. He was imprisoned in northern Nigeria under Kano state's blasphemy law, the penalty for which is death by hanging. He is appealing his criminal case to the Supreme Court of Nigeria. I will go into a little more detail about his situation because I am urging all who can to join our international alliance and other advocates to urge the Kano state government to drop this unjust prosecution, for the international human rights community to speak out on behalf of Sharif-Aminu and for Nigeria to repeal its blasphemy laws.

The case is very important. The Supreme Court issued a filing number this week, so we await the hearing date. Sharif-Aminu was first arrested and charged with blasphemy in March 2020. He was convicted in an upper sharia court, despite not having legal representation at the time of his trial. He had shared audio messages on WhatsApp that some people thought were blasphemous to the Prophet Mohammed because they elevated another person above the Prophet. As I said, the Kano state sharia penal code codifies blasphemy, which in this case is defined as insulting the Koran or any Muslim prophet, as an offence with the penalty of death.

Sharif-Aminu is arguing that his case should be dismissed because the blasphemy law is unconstitutional. In August this year, the Court of Appeal upheld the constitutionality of the blasphemy law. That is why he has appealed to the Supreme Court. He argues that his situation and the Kano state law violate not only international law in terms of freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression but the Nigerian constitution, which on paper protects both of those rights. He would welcome international advocacy highlighting his case, which is a very important one. It is the first time the Nigerian Supreme Court will hear a constitutional challenge to the northern states' laws on death penalties for blasphemy. A positive ruling in such a case offers the possibility of abolishing them.

I turn now to persecution in the most egregious form: genocide, the crime of crimes. In 2016, I tabled a motion on genocide against the Yazidis, Christians and other religious groups at the hands of Daesh in Iraq and Syria. Some in the Chamber today will recall that there was a passionate debate in the House. The House spoke with one voice and voted unanimously to recognise these atrocities as genocide. Over the following years, we have seen more cases where the elements of the definition of genocide have been there, including the atrocities specifically targeting religious groups: the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, Christians in Nigeria and Hazaras in Afghanistan.

In the case of the Uyghur Muslims, the House made the determination that the atrocities against them constituted genocide. One million Uyghurs, some estimate many more, are detained in concentration camps in Xinjiang. An independent tribunal has found that to be genocide. I join colleagues from both Houses in calling it that. I know that we must be careful about the words that we use, but where the elements are there, we should call out atrocities for what they are. It is time that our Government found ways to engage effectively on the issue of genocide.

In 2019, the Bishop of Truro published the Truro review, which I have the responsibility for taking forward to implementation as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. In recommendation 7, the bishop called upon the UK Government to ensure that, "there are mechanisms in place to facilitate an immediate response to atrocity crimes, including genocide through activities such as setting up early warning mechanisms to identify countries at risk of atrocities, diplomacy to help de-escalate tensions and resolve disputes, and developing support to help with upstream prevention work."

We must ask ourselves what else we can do to ensure that we implement that recommendation fully and meaningfully. In April this year, the independent expert review of progress on the Truro review found that recommendation 7 has not yet been delivered.

On 28 October this year, in the other place, Lord Alton of Liverpool introduced the Genocide Determination Bill. It had its Second Reading then, on the day after International Religious Freedom Day. The Bill provides for important mechanisms, including one that empowers victims to have a court determination of atrocities as genocide or as a situation at serious risk of genocide. I ask the Minister to ensure that time is given for that Bill to be considered. We know that our responses to genocide are not perfect. Genocides continue to occur and change is required. The Genocide Determination Bill is a step in that direction. For those who are undecided about whether we need change, I recommend a book written by Lord Alton and Dr Ewelina Ochab, "State Responses to Crimes of Genocide: What Went Wrong and How to Change It".

At this time of profound global uncertainty and insecurity, we must be more vigilant than ever to shine a light on human rights abuses. In particular, we must be alert to early warning signs of atrocities. We must work together. I hope I have shown in some of my examples that together we can make a difference to promote and protect fundamental human rights for the vulnerable and the exploited, and for the good of us all.

2.6 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is a delight to take part in this debate, not least because my biggest anxiety about the world is that it is becoming more, not less, authoritarian. More Governments have given up on democracy and moved towards dictatorship than we thought possible. We always thought that progress would mean people enjoying greater freedoms as the world moved forward. Unfortunately, that is not the case for many people around the world.

I am struck by the number of countries that retain the death penalty. It is obviously shocking that so many states in the United States of America retain it. I am conscious that there are many countries in the world where people can be executed solely for their sexuality, including Afghanistan, Brunei, Iran, Mauritania, Nigeria, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Many of those countries would say that they do not use the death penalty as there have been no executions. None the less, people are sentenced to death and then have to live in a sort of limbo land, thinking that they may be executed at any point.

On Saudi Arabia, I will simply say that it was quite shocking earlier in the year when the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) came to the

[Chris Bryant]

Foreign Affairs Committee as Foreign Secretary. I asked her about when she had raised human rights concerns with Gulf states. There was just silence in the room. She tried to suggest that she had done it several times—or it had been done several times—but she could not come up with a single occasion on which the British Government had raised human rights abuses with Saudi Arabia.

I understand why the Government want to turn away from relying on gas and oil from authoritarian states such as Russia, but it is not much good if we then just simply turn to another set of authoritarian states in the middle east, and are not prepared to ask the questions that we now feel able to ask of Russia. For instance, it is truly shocking that the British Government have still not said that Jamal Khashoggi was murdered at the deliberate instigation of the Saudi Government, and dismembered on Saudi territory. That does not do anybody any favours. It is shocking that the British Government do not seem to have complained to Saudi Arabia about the 81 executions that happened on a single day earlier this year, or that there are now more than 100 people on death row, potentially awaiting execution at any point.

We have to continue to ask those questions. I do not think that anybody respects us when they know what we think, but we refuse to say it. It just means that we are weak, and people rely on our weakness. I find it shocking, too, that a country such as Indonesia has just introduced a new law that outlaws sexual activity of any kind outside marriage. I am not sure how that will aid the tourism trade in Indonesia. The country is only just getting back on its feet. Those kinds of repressive measures are simply backward, and do nobody any favours.

I worry about our Government for two reasons. First, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), we have not had an annual report on human rights since 8 July 2021. That is a long time ago. We have been doing it since 2003. It has become standard, and all the human rights organisations in the UK look to the process and love to feed into it. Other countries around the world look to the UK's leadership in this space, and it feels as if the Government have simply surrendered that space.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The hon. Member must also be aware that it seems to have been a consistent Foreign Office policy for about 10 years now to reduce the number of human rights advisers in our embassies around the world.

Chris Bryant: I was going to come to that point. The right hon. Gentleman has made it for me, which is great. Another point is that the European convention on human rights was written by a Conservative Member of Parliament. It was drafted, on the back of the second world war, to say that we did not want the human rights abuses that happened in Italy and Germany to happen on our continent again. Yes, there are all sorts of complications with the way that the Court operates, but if the British Government keep on rattling the cage about leaving the European Court of Human Rights and the European convention, we would automatically no longer be a member of the Council of Europe. We

would join Belarus and Russia as the countries in Europe that no longer subscribe, which would be a terrible shame.

One of the things that we have got terribly wrong over the last 12 years in our foreign policy is that we have kept trying to appease authoritarian dictatorships around the world rather than stand up for what we genuinely believe. Sometimes we have relied too much on the United States, which is sometimes a wonderful ally and sometimes not very reliable, depending on who the President is. Who knows what may happen in two or three years? If Donald Trump were in the White House now, what would we be saying in relation to Ukraine? Far too often we vacillate on China. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) was right to refer to the situation facing the Uyghurs in China. Our Government have flip-flopped endlessly on whether to be robust on that policy, which is a terrible shame.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) spoke about the Minister withdrawing his comment. He was not correcting the record; he was withdrawing his comment on Saudi Arabia and whether the gentleman concerned had been tortured, which all the evidence shows he was. All that points to a Government who are uncertain about whether human rights really matter in the way in which we define ourselves as a country around the world. That will pay poor dividends in the long term for the UK and the values we believe in.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point on the supposed correction of the record. Surely if the Foreign Office now has evidence that shows that what the Minister said then is incorrect, there is a mechanism for him to come to the House and explain why the mistake was made. Surely that would be a more appropriate way to proceed.

Chris Bryant: If the Minister wanted to, he could publish a written ministerial statement that made the whole situation clearer, but I fear that basically the Government have been told off by the Saudi Government, and have decided that the Saudi Government have more say in the matter than we do. I guess the Saudis must be laughing their way to the end of the week.

In some countries, there are phenomenal people with bravery we do not even dream of in British politics, where we rely on the democratic system. I will talk first about Colombia, which I know my friends, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), know quite a lot about. It has one of the largest numbers of displaced people anywhere in the world, and the longest sustained internal warfare or civil war—however we want to determine it. Many of us have been desperate for the peace accord to be properly instituted, which would mean that people would have the land that was stolen from them restored.

Last year, there were another 52,880 forced displacements in Colombia. The war is still ongoing. Repeated Governments have failed to deal with it; let us hope that the new Government will be able to make advances. This year, 169 human rights defenders have been killed, often by paramilitaries and people acting on behalf of hard-right organisations, and there have been 92 massacres. Lots of children aged between 10 and 17 have been

forcibly recruited to carry guns. That is just wrong, and I hope the British Government will do literally everything they can to help bring about a proper peace accord with the restitution of stolen land. There are six armed conflicts still ongoing in Colombia.

I want to refer to a few individuals I think are absolutely magnificent. Sasha Skochilenko, who is in Russia, fills her life with art and music. She plays all sorts of musical instruments. On 31 March, she peacefully protested against Russia's invasion of Ukraine by replacing price tags in a local supermarket in St Petersburg with small paper labels containing facts about the invasion. She was arrested and charged for her peaceful action, and has been held in detention ever since in appalling conditions. I have mentioned many others in Russia who have been arrested this year. It is absolutely shocking, and I feel that our refusal to deal robustly with the first annexation of Crimea in 2014 is part of what emboldened Putin. We must learn from that as we face the rest of the world.

Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara is a self-taught black Cuban artist. He loves to paint, dance and wear the colour pink—it doesn't do any good for me. On 11 July 2021, he posted a video online saying he would be joining one of the largest demonstrations that Cuba has seen in decades. He was arrested and taken to Guanajay maximum security prison, where he remains to this day. His health is declining and he needs proper care. Would we have that courage in this country? Would anyone in this Parliament have that courage if we thought we would be arrested and sent to a foul, dirty prison with no proper healthcare, food and warmth?

Let me turn to the Magnitsky sanctions. As the Minister knows—I think she is wearing a jacket from my family clan, the MacLeods; I am not sure whether she has the right to wear it, but it is a human right that is extended now to all. *[Interruption.]* But not MacLeod.

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): Order. Stick to the subject.

Chris Bryant: I care passionately that one of the things that the Government have done that is good in the past few years is to introduce the Magnitsky sanctions, after a lot of brow-beating by some Conservative and Labour colleagues. The former leader of the Conservative party, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), and I chair the all-party parliamentary group on Magnitsky sanctions. To date, the UK has made only 108 designations under the Magnitsky sanction regime, accounting for 14% of all Magnitsky sanctions imposed globally. Some 69% of sanctions imposed by our allies in the United States of America, the European Union and Canada have not been replicated by the UK, and I simply do not understand why there is such an enormous lacuna. Only 2% of UK sanctions target perpetrators in states considered to be allies of the UK, all of which relate to Pakistan. Is that just because we have decided that if a Government are an ally, we will not impose any sanctions, even on individuals who are manifestly abusing human rights? If so, that is a problem.

The potential consequences of the UK's failure to co-ordinate with its allies has been exposed this week. Al-Jazeera has reported that, last Human Rights Day, the UK decided at the last minute not to join the US in

imposing sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion in Bangladesh, which is the security force responsible for thousands of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. It is often referred to as the death squad.

It has also been reported that last year, after the US had imposed sanctions, high-ranking members of the Rapid Action Battalion travelled to the UK to receive training on, among other things, mass surveillance technology. The UK should not be involved in that. I hope that the Minister will be able to say that this is categorically untrue, and that she looks to her notes to reply on that matter later. This case demonstrates the significant consequences of the UK failing to act in response to such egregious human rights abuses, and failing to co-ordinate or multilateralise its sanctions. It has not only undermined the potential effectiveness of the US sanctions, but led to the UK potentially being complicit in the human rights abuses taking place.

Finally, I pay phenomenal tribute to the women of Iran. There is no greater courage to be seen in the world today—and people have been killed today in Iran—than that which we have seen from the women there. Women lead where often men need to follow.

2.20 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Maria. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) most warmly on her success in obtaining the debate, which is timely in so many different ways. Sadly, of course, debates that expose human rights abuses around the world always seem to be timely; there always seems to be something we need to say about what is happening in some part of the world.

I pay warm tribute to the variety of non-governmental organisations and campaign groups that operate in this area. I am privileged to have worked with many over the years; Amnesty International and Reprieve would be the most obvious. I have been privileged to work recently with the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, and with B'Tselem and Breaking the Silence in relation to activities in Palestine. I have also worked with the World Uyghur Congress and Hong Kong Watch, of which I am a patron.

I will highlight concerns about just a few areas, because we have a good range of interests and I do not want to take up too much time. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West spoke about her concerns with Bahrain; I will not repeat them, but I very much share them. I was present recently when BIRD and Human Rights Watch published a joint report on the use of the death penalty in Bahrain. Since the end of the moratorium in Bahrain there have been six executions, and there are a further 26 men on death row who could be executed at any time. It is particularly relevant for us to speak about what is going on in Bahrain, because we are, of course, significant funders of the Gulf strategy fund—in fact, we have the Gulf strategy fund, which goes significantly to Bahrain. I wonder how many of our constituents would be content to know that we as a country—our taxpayers—are funding a situation in a place where the human rights of its people only get worse?

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

Like the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West, I am always happy to engage in and encourage progress but, where we see no progress coming—as seems to be the case with Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and others, sadly—it is difficult to see the justification for continuing the supply of taxpayers' money to a country such as Bahrain, which is not exactly on the world's poor list in the first place. It begins to look pretty much like rewarding bad behaviour. I would like to tell hon. Members the comparable figure for the uses of the death penalty in China, but unfortunately none of us knows. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said earlier from a sedentary position that it topped the league. I do not think that there is any doubt on the part of any of us about that; the difficulty we all face is that we do not know just how high above the rest of the players in that league it happens to be.

In particular, I have had concerns in recent years about the position of people in Hong Kong, but I will focus on the position of those who live under what has now been determined by an independent tribunal to be a genocide, featuring crimes against humanity, in Xinjiang province. Yesterday, I was privileged to meet the Government in exile of East Turkestan with Rodney Dixon KC, who is working very creatively to bring a case to the International Criminal Court. There are different ways in which cases can be brought. The first is by reference from the Security Council. Well, for as long as China is a member of the Security Council, we know there will not be a case brought against China through that route for what is happening in Xinjiang province. The second way is the route that Ukraine is taking against Russia, through a state reference. Again, that will not happen.

Rodney Dixon KC is pursuing a line of argument regarding cross-border international crimes that would be sufficient to fall within the jurisdiction of the ICC. It is essentially a question for the chief prosecutor Karim Khan KC—also a distinguished British legal practitioner—as to whether the jurisdiction will be accepted. The ICC is an independent body, and, like all courts, we must respect its judicial independence, as we would anywhere else in our domestic system. Of course, the prosecution brings with it quasi-political aspects and functions.

My ask of the Minister is that our Government do everything they can to support the case being brought by Rodney Dixon KC, but also to offer every support to the chief prosecutor. In the event that he is persuaded on the grounds of the evidence made available to him to accept jurisdiction and pursue the case, our Government, as a party to the ICC, should be prepared to put some money where their mouth is and ensure that a well-funded and properly resourced case is brought to the ICC with regard to what is going on in Xinjiang.

We have to be realistic about what we can achieve, even through the ICC. The refusal of the Chinese Government to allow any outside observers from the United Nations or anywhere else into the region surely makes it clear that there will not be a great deal of co-operation and, ultimately, it is difficult to see where a case might go. But it is like water on a stone: we have to take every opportunity to bring the world's attention to what is happening there.

Sir Geoffrey Nice KC in his independent—albeit essentially self-constituted—tribunal concluded that the evidence exists that there have been crimes against humanity and that a systematic genocide is being perpetrated against the Uyghur population. There is already substantial evidence, but we have to get it into every legal forum possible. With that in mind, I ask the Minister to look at the case being brought by Rodney Dixon KC and, with her officials, to explore every way we can possibly support it, if it is something that sits entirely comfortably with the stated policy of His Majesty's Government at the present time.

My final point on Xinjiang and what we can do with regard to it relates to the continuation of doing business with those companies that have been responsible for the infrastructure around which the genocide has been perpetrated. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke about that in relation to the noble Lord Alton's Bill in the other place, but there is so much we could do without necessarily having the compulsor of Lord Alton's Bill in legislation.

Hikvision built the most incredibly intrusive infrastructure that was used to oppress the Uyghur population, and the company now operates widely in this country. Earlier this year I spent a day on Papa Westray in the Orkneys doing my constituency rounds. I held a surgery and went into the shop and post office. I still had some time at the end of the day, so I popped in, as is occasionally my wont, to spend a little bit of time in St Boniface Kirk, an ancient church in Papa Westray, where I was horrified to find a Hikvision CCTV camera. I can say to the Minister that, beyond any shadow of a doubt, if Hikvision has now got to St Boniface Kirk in Papa Westray, it is pretty well everywhere, and that is something to which we need to attend, because, as with so many other technological developments, we have no idea where the data could get to through the back door.

2.31 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on securing today's debate and on the speech that she made earlier and her remarks about the parliamentary human rights group, which I have been a member of since I was first elected. It is a genuinely independent human rights group and has done a fantastic amount of work over the years. Long may it continue.

It is wonderful to have a debate here in Westminster Hall on a Thursday afternoon, but why is the debate not on the Floor of the House? Why is it not in Government time? Why is there not a Foreign Office report on human rights, as there was every year from 2003 onwards? It is simply unacceptable that a Government who claim to fully adhere to all UN human rights protocols cannot do a report on our own activities and views on issues facing different countries around the world—things that are extremely important.

We have to put this debate within the framework of the human rights law that we have. We put into law the Human Rights Act 1998, which then put into UK case law the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, as well as the European convention on human rights, which was already recognised and, as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) pointed out, was written by UK barristers and judges in 1948.

The Government have constantly objected to the European Court of Human Rights—its administration and its judgments—and got very excited about an interim judgment that prevented an unnamed asylum seeker being removed to Rwanda, where he had never sought to go, anyway. That was then used to start a huge campaign about why we should withdraw from the European Court of Human Rights and the European convention on human rights. As the hon. Member for Rhondda correctly pointed out, if we withdraw from those, we then withdraw from the Council of Europe because there is no basis for being in it.

The function of the Council of Europe relates fundamentally to human rights. It monitors the election of judges to the court. Everyone accepts there are inefficiencies within that legal system—I am sure there is no part of the British legal system that has any inefficiency in it whatever. The important point is that we are adherents to the European Court and the European convention on human rights.

Mr Carmichael: I assure the right hon. Gentleman, from my own years in legal practice, that if he wants to find inefficiencies in a legal system, he does not have to go all the way to Strasbourg to find them. The point is that the Human Rights Act did all the things that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, but it did more than that, or we have subsequently used it to do more than that. We have hardwired it into the devolution settlement for Scotland and Wales, and also into the Good Friday agreement and the devolution set-up for Northern Ireland. How can that hardwiring be undone without damaging the institutions that are protected when the Human Rights Act is invoked?

Jeremy Corbyn: The right hon. Gentleman's points are absolutely correct. The 1998 Act enshrined the laws I have mentioned, but it also created a culture of human rights that has developed in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland through foreign policy and in many other attitudes. When the Minister responds to the debate, I hope she will make it very clear that there is no question of a British Bill of Rights or a Bill of Rights that undermines the principles of the United Nations' universal declaration of human rights, the European convention on human rights or the European Court of Human Rights. If we go away from that, then what future is there for human rights in this country? Who are we to lecture anybody, anywhere around the world, on abuses of human rights if we have walked away from the very conventions that we are supposed to be adhering to in the first place?

The arguments used to oppose the interim judgment made by the European Court of Human Rights was that the asylum seekers were "illegal". Let me be absolutely clear and put it on record that there is no such thing as an illegal asylum seeker. The legal right to seek asylum is set out in international law and in UK law, as we should understand and respect.

Yesterday, I was at the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons of the Council of Europe. It was a lengthy but fascinating meeting that was very well attended by people from all over the member states of the Council of Europe. There were two significant reports, one of which was about the situation facing refugees from Afghanistan. It looked at problems with Afghan refugees settling around Europe, the poverty in

which they are living, the numbers now being pushed back from trying to enter Greece or other European countries—I will come to that in a moment—and the desperate poverty of people in Afghanistan.

There have been 21 years of war in Afghanistan. Billions of pounds and dollars have been spent on that particular war. We have left behind the chaos of a lack of human rights and respect for people, along with desperate poverty and hunger. I know it is not central to this debate, but we can do a lot better by the people of Afghanistan than ignoring the situation. Whatever one's views on the Afghan war, we have responsibilities to those people and the poverty in which they have been left.

We also had a very interesting report from the International Committee of the Red Cross on the question of asylum seekers. It put forward six policy recommendations, which I will refer to quickly because I am conscious that colleagues wish to speak. They are:

"National authorities and regional bodies should: Acknowledge the tragedy of missing migrants and address the problems their families face as a result of this situation. Put in place preventive measures such as ensuring that the respective legal frameworks are compatible with international law and adequately address the main humanitarian problems. Integrate the missing migrant issue into continental, regional and national policy and cooperation frameworks. Strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation in search efforts, including humanitarian rescue activities if migrants are in distress... Establish clear pathways to be followed in searching and identifying persons missing in the context of migration... Respond to the various needs of families and ensure institutional and legal frameworks that allow for an individual specific assessment and response."

Those policy recommendations were important because the number of missing people around the world is increasing very fast. I was astonished to hear that far fewer than 20% of those who die in the Mediterranean or other seas around Europe are ever identified. That is life for some people. They live in poverty, under oppression, seek asylum somewhere else and die, unnamed in an ocean, while trying to get to a place of safety. On International Human Rights Day, of all days, can we not have a sense of humanity in our approach towards these people and the desperate situation in which they are forced to live at the present time?

Pushbacks, which I believe to be not just illegal but immoral, are practised in a number of countries, and the argument often put forward, particularly by Conservative politicians, is that we should have almost a military response to people trying to cross the English channel. These are desperate people trying to get to a place of safety. We should bring them to a place of safety and look after them after that—let them contribute to our society. The cause of people seeking asylum has to be examined, because we cannot look at human rights in the abstract. The reality is that it is driven by war and the appalling invasion of Ukraine. Millions of people have sought refuge, and there has been a terrible loss of life, both of people in Ukraine and of conscripted Russian soldiers. Russian peace activists have also been arrested. Hopefully, there will be some kind of process to bring about a cessation of the fighting and a long-term solution to the issues that have led to the war in Ukraine.

There are so many other wars that I would go on for far too long if I tried to mention all of them. I have already referred to Afghanistan, but the situation in Iraq is far from perfect. I still meet people who have sought asylum from Iraq, and I meet people from Libya

[Jeremy Corbyn]

who have sought asylum from that country. What is the connection between those three countries? All have had UK military involvement in their conflicts. The war in Yemen, to which the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and others referred, is largely occasioned by huge supplies of American and British weaponry to Saudi Arabia, which uses them to oppress the people of Yemen.

Then we have the occupations, which are always wrong in any context. They include the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the colonisation of the West Bank through the settlement policy. Again, that leads people seeking safety to go somewhere else. The consequences of our inaction, or positive action in supplying arms to the aggressor in many cases, often lead to the problems that we are now concerned with and complaining about.

Africa is often not mentioned in many debates, yet the reality of war in the Congo and other places is that it leads to huge displacements of people. It is occasioned by huge quantities of often small arms and lighter arms being sold to fuel those conflicts, and they are often funded by mineral interests and those who seek to gain land or power. We have to look very seriously at those issues.

My friend the hon. Member for Rhondda mentioned the situation in Colombia. I was in Colombia for the first round of the presidential election—I had been there before—and I talked to a lot of human rights groups, farmers groups, trade unions and academic groups. I did a seminar at the Catholic University while I was there. To the credit of President Petro, his new Government and Vice President Francia Márquez, they have started peace talks with the other guerrilla groups. They are trying to bring about a total peace accord, and they are proposing substantial land reform legislation. It is going to be very difficult, because there is an awful lot of opposition to what they are achieving from very powerful vested interests, and we have to wish them well in that process.

I hope that in this debate and future debates we look to our own culpability in all this. I have mentioned the wars, but we also need to think about the huge volume of arms sales that we are promoting and the way in which our embassies around the world have been turned into commercial operations for British companies in order to improve British exports. I can understand the need for that, but not at the expense of taking away the human rights advisers or, indeed, of no longer continuing the former policy, both within the EU and nationally, of having a human rights agenda in our overseas trade arrangements.

Sometimes, however, one gets good news in a difficult situation, and yesterday there was a very interesting judgment in a court in Oaxaca, Mexico. I have been quite involved in supporting the case. A young woman called Claudia Uruchurtu was arrested while she took part in a demonstration in Oaxaca against the corruption of the mayor of her town. The mayor of the town of Nochistlán was deemed to be corrupt, and she was part of the opposition to what the mayor was doing. At the end of the demonstration, she disappeared. Her body has never been found. She has never been located. Her family, who live in the UK, were obviously desperately worried about her.

After a lot of action by good people in Mexico, including the British embassy and others, who did a great deal to support the family, the case was brought to court yesterday and the mayor was found guilty in the case of the disappearance of Claudia. The sentencing has not yet happened—we await that next week—but it is significant that in this one case of somebody's disappearance under duress pressure, the perpetrator has been found guilty. That will give some hope to the families of the many, many others who disappeared in Mexico, of which there are at least 100,000 in recent years.

While one obviously condemns the disappearances and the abuse of human rights, one should pay tribute to the Government of President López Obrador for taking on these cases. It is creating a culture of respect for human rights and empowering the Ministry of the Interior to investigate historic abuses of human rights, including the disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa students some years ago.

There was news today that the Al Jazeera broadcasting channel is referring the case of the murder of Shireen Abu Akleh to the International Criminal Court. I wish the channel well in doing that. Shireen was shot in cold blood for no other reason than that she was filming Israeli soldiers oppressing Palestinian people. She is one of many journalists who have been injured or shot not only in the conflict in Palestine but in many other places around the world. We should recognise that there are all sorts of human rights defenders and they come in all shades. They can be journalists just as much as human rights defenders from voluntary human rights organisations. We should be doing all we can to speak up for them.

The issues abound in many other countries that I could refer to today. Briefly, I obviously concur with the remarks made about the women of Iran and their bravery in demanding human rights themselves, and there are others who want to see human rights throughout Iran. The British Government are also supporting people such as Mehran Raoof, who is a workers' rights representative. We have to keep on demanding their release.

Nazanin's release was excellent news, but she was sadly one of a number. Human rights have to be universal. They do not mean going to war with somebody. They do mean engagement to try to achieve better human rights. The case of Alaa Abd El-Fattah, who is still in prison in Egypt, was taken up during COP27. COP27 is over, the greenwashing is finished, they have all left town and people have stopped talking about his case. He has family in this country. He deserves to be freed, and we should support his release.

I have a very multicultural constituency, which I am very proud to represent in Parliament. It includes many people who come from all parts of Kurdistan—from Syria, Iran, Iraq and Turkey. The conditions facing Kurdish people in northern Syria are appalling, and the bombing that is now taking place against the Kurdistan Democratic party forces in Iran and Iraq and the problems that are going on in Turkey have to be recognised. Surely at the centre of all this is a failure to recognise the rights of people to their own self-determination and self-expression. The Kurdish people demand and deserve those rights. It is not good enough for us all just to go to Nowruz celebrations in March. We have to act all year round to ensure the Kurdish people get their place of safety.

Rights are universal. Rights of workers are universal. The International Labour Organisation confirms that. I hope the Minister will be able to tell us that Britain is no longer going ahead with legislation that will be inimical to the International Labour Organisation and the various pieces of human rights legislation we have around the world that we should abide by. Workers' rights are human rights, just as much as anybody else's.

We need to educate our young people not to see the Human Rights Act as a problem or something to make a light-hearted joke about on the radio or television or in newspaper attacks—"Somebody's abusing the Human Rights Act". It is there only because of the bravery of human rights defenders in this country and around the world. If we walk away from the European convention and human rights legislation, we will leave a terrible legacy for future generations. The hon. Member for Rhondda is right when he says that there has been a pushback against human rights around the world. Let us not be part of it; let us go in the opposite direction by defending and extending human rights. The next generation will thank us for that and benefit from it.

2.50 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Maria. I am pleased to be called in this debate to mark Human Rights Day 2022. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on her excellent opening speech, and I thank other Members for their very powerful speeches.

I am a co-chair of the all-party parliamentary human rights group, and I want to thank all the human rights defenders and organisations that it engages with. I also thank the Barrow Cadbury Trust for the support it gives to the APPG, and Nichole Piche for all her work and her excellent briefings to Members.

I was prompted to speak in this debate after I saw a very disturbing post on social media last week. It was of a woman in Afghanistan who was fully covered. She was on the floor in the street, and she was being beaten by a Taliban man. I assume that there had been some infringement of the Taliban rules. It was sickening and brutal, and it was clearly a misogynistic attack.

As the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) just said, the situation in Afghanistan is alarming, and I am concerned that it appears to have largely fallen off the radar. The UN has deemed it one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. The country is entering its third consecutive year of drought-like conditions and its second year of crippling economic decline, all the while still reeling from the after-effects of decades of conflict and recurrent natural disasters. The fast-approaching winter spells more hardship for the Afghan people, with food insecurity and malnutrition set to rise even further.

The Taliban de facto authorities regularly and flagrantly violate the fundamental rights of women and girls in Afghanistan, and their actions possibly even amount to genocide persecution, which is a crime against humanity. In the images on social media and generally in the media, we see men with beards and guns terrorising women and girls on the streets of Afghanistan. Girls of secondary school age are denied schooling. It is the only country in the world where that is the case. Women are

not allowed to go to the park or the gym, and women protesters and activists are being silenced. They are sometimes imprisoned and even disappeared.

I want to highlight the case of the activist Zarifa Yaqoubi and the four men who were detained with her following a press conference in early November, which was disrupted. The arrest and detention in early November of the women's human rights activists Farhat Popalzai and Humaira Yusuf have been highlighted, and I echo the calls for their immediate release.

Although the pressing humanitarian needs of the Afghan people must be addressed as a matter of urgency, and the Taliban must be urged to allow unfettered access to humanitarian organisations to all those in need, we cannot forget that women and girls are among those suffering the most in the country. We need to find some way to help to alleviate that suffering, and I want to highlight something that the UK Government could do to provide more help.

It has been reported that Afghan nationals promised resettlement in the UK, including women at risk, continue to await a response from the relevant officials, with not one person accepted and evacuated from Afghanistan under the Home Office's Afghan citizen resettlement scheme. That scheme was apparently intended to help Afghans who assisted the UK efforts in Afghanistan and stood up for values such as democracy, women's rights, freedom of speech and the rule of law, as well as vulnerable people, which obviously includes women and girls at risk.

It has also been reported that only between five and eight members of staff in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—the Department administering the scheme—are working on it, compared with so many more who worked on the Ukraine schemes earlier this year. I ask the Minister to respond to those reports today, or to write to me with further details, to provide reassurance that the Government will ensure that more Afghans who are at risk, and at least the 20,000 who they have committed to resettle in the coming years, will benefit from the scheme.

To carry on the theme of women, I will refer to Iran. I express my solidarity with the very brave women of Iran; the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West talked passionately about those women who have been protesting after the death in September of 22-year-old Jina Mahsa Amini, following her arrest by Iran's so-called morality police for not wearing her hijab properly. We have been told of the widespread scenes of women waving their headscarves in the air and setting them on fire, and their demand for the end of compulsory dress codes and other discrimination against them.

A population law passed in Iran last November provides incentives for early marriage, such as an interest-free loan to those who marry at 25 or younger. The Iranian Government's own reports show that child marriage is on the rise, and Iran's civil code provides that girls can marry at 13 and boys at 15, and even at a younger age if authorised by a judge. After marriage, Iran's laws grant husbands significant control over their wives' lives, including where they can live and the jobs they can take. Even though the Iranian attorney general appeared to indicate that the morality police would be disbanded, he also stressed that the judiciary would continue to

"monitor behavioural actions at the community level."

Courageous protesters remain hugely at risk.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

I also want to say something about Ethiopia, which has been raised with me by some of my constituents. It is, of course, good news that the African Union has recently brokered a cessation of hostilities agreement between the Ethiopian Government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front; however, the many victims of serious human rights violations want and deserve to see justice done. I must emphasise that all parties to the armed conflict, including military forces from Eritrea, have been responsible for atrocities, and diverse communities have experienced—and may still be experiencing—serious violations that may even amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Specifically on the violation of the rights of women and girls, it has been noted that gender-based violence in Ethiopia was already endemic before the outbreak of war in 2020, but the conflict has exacerbated the problem. These women and girls need to be better supported and protected, and their perpetrators held to account. There is also concern that so far, women appear to be largely excluded from the peace process. That is something that has to be urgently remedied.

Colombia has been mentioned many times in the Chamber this afternoon, and I know there is a great deal of experience and knowledge about Colombia among Members present. I have had the privilege of meeting many brave and highly effective human rights defenders from Colombia over the years, and have visited the country twice. Being a human rights defender in Colombia continues to be very dangerous: despite the signing of the peace accord between the Colombian Government and the FARC rebel group, at least 150 human rights defenders and social leaders have been killed in Colombia during the first nine months of this year. The truth commission published its report earlier this year, and the APPG was pleased to be able to host one of the truth commissioners with the support of the FCDO. That report's recommendations need to be actioned, and the international community should provide the necessary support for that to be done.

It is also vital that women whose rights were violated, including as victims of sexual violence, can hold their perpetrators to account. Many of them have been incredibly brave and have spoken out, and they are at the forefront of trying to ensure accountability. Although there is no amnesty for perpetrators of sexual violence, it is not something to which any of the parties to the conflict wish to admit. A lot of work has gone into preparing national cases, referred to as "macro-cases", on sexual violence, but I understand that the judicial system needs more resources to move forward on them. That is something that the international community could assist with, and the United Kingdom Government has a special role to play, as they hold the pen on Colombia at the UN Security Council.

I also want to highlight the ongoing serious violations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which have, again, been brought to my attention again by constituents—in this instance members of the Banyamulenge community. The situation in eastern DRC in particular continues to be very worrying for many communities; state security forces and the UN peacekeeping force MONUSCO—the United Nations Organization Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—are finding

it challenging to keep the peace between groups that are often competing for land, other natural resources and power, and nursing deep-seated grievances. Those communities can suffer from persecution, forced displacement and even targeted killings. Many also require ongoing humanitarian assistance. I am aware that the FCDO has provided some support to civilians at risk, but it would be helpful to know whether a joint analysis of conflict and stability, and an assessment through an atrocity prevention lens, has recently been carried out to identify specific groups at risk of further violations and atrocity crimes.

I want to raise the issue of cuts to UK aid. The needs of people in the world appear to be increasing as a result of conflict, growing authoritarianism, ethnic and religious persecution, climate change and so on, yet our aid budget is decreasing. We obviously cannot do more with less. As a constituency MP for Hull, I understand that the needs of this country are also growing and acute, particularly given the cost of living crisis, which is badly affecting so many of our constituents.

It is, however, short-sighted to believe that cutting the assistance provided to individuals and countries globally is a helpful response. We should push back against dictatorship, support human rights defenders and peacebuilders, prevent and promote accountability for atrocities and sexual violence, and uphold the international human rights framework at home and abroad, not only on moral grounds but because they are smart things to do—particularly in terms of our own security, better trading opportunities and enhanced international co-operation on terrorism, organised crime and climate change.

As the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, I know only too well that a failure to offer support upstream in countries means that problems will eventually come closer to home—as, for example, with the flow of small boats crossing the English channel with people from Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan and many other places. There is more that the FCDO could do and should do, and that requires access to further resources.

I started with my concerns about women's human rights in Afghanistan, and have also spoken about women in other countries. I end by reminding hon. Members of a famous quote from Hillary Clinton that "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights once and for all."

Human rights are hard won. They rise and fall together, and never must advances for some come at the expense of the human rights that others have struggled to win. That is true here in the UK and everywhere around the world where oppression holds back progress and freedom for all.

[*IAN PAISLEY in the Chair*]

3.4 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for securing this important debate. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) is not in her place at the moment, but I commend her on her contribution. Mine will have a similar focus. What a pleasure it is to follow the right hon. Member for Kingston

upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). I agree wholeheartedly with her comments. I asked a question in business questions today on Afghanistan and the very public, grotesque, violent, criminal and disturbing execution that was carried out, just yesterday. The right hon. Lady is absolutely right on that, and in highlighting the issue of women judges from Afghanistan.

We welcome those judges to the UK. I commend them. They were at the forefront of pro-democracy efforts in Afghanistan, and were some of those most at risk from the Taliban. They have been in the UK now for more than a year and are still stuck in temporary hotel accommodation. They are professional people who will be able to make a massive contribution to society. I am quite disturbed that we have not yet moved them on. I am not sure whether that is the Minister's direct responsibility, but I would be grateful if he would pass that issue to the right Minister for reply. These are people who have risked their lives. They are here, and we welcome them, and that is great news, but we have to give them some vision for the future and some hope that they can make a contribution in their new homeland, where they want to live. I commend the right hon. Lady on her comments; that issue was in my mind already before we came here today.

Today, we mark International Human Rights Day. The theme this year is dignity, freedom and justice for all. All Members who have spoken have referred to that theme. Since the adoption of the universal declaration of human rights in 1948, it has served as a foundation for an expanding system of human rights protection across the globe. That is something that every country should aim for. However, the protections that human rights offer have never been under greater threat. The rise of authoritarianism, which the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) referred to—he is absolutely right—the global financial crisis, climate change, the covid-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine, escalating attacks against minorities and restrictions in civil society have led to a sustained assault on those fundamental rights in recent years.

For me it is clear—I have said it before, and will say it again. Human rights and freedom of religious belief walk hand in hand. They complement each other in the focus that they bring and the issues they target. When I think of Ukraine, I am minded from my chairmanship of the APPG of the 400 Baptist churches that have been destroyed across eastern Ukraine. I think of the pastors of those churches, who have gone missing, and in many cases have not been found—we do not know where they are at this time. Other people have referred to the displaced, and those pastors are some of the displaced. Their congregations were dispersed, probably to western Ukraine, but some elements are left in eastern Ukraine under Russian control. We think of them as well.

As this year's theme for the day is dignity, freedom and justice for all, I want to talk about a right that is often overlooked internationally but has been prioritised by this House and by this Government, and that is the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief. That right is a cornerstone for many. Faith is deeply personal and impacts every area of a person's life. Despite that, it is often overlooked in the greater sphere of life.

Freedom of religion or belief was excluded from the sustainable development goals, which it should have been part of; it is seldom considered in humanitarian

aid or international development. It should be, and must be, and we have asked for that in nearly every debate we have had on the subject. I hope the Minister can give us some indication of whether that would be the Government's intention.

Religious minorities are often disproportionately affected by the impact of climate change, poverty and terror attacks. I want to talk about Nigeria, a country where human rights and freedom of religion or belief are abused. The north-east and middle states of Nigeria have seen atrocities on a horrendous scale. It is the most populated country in all of Africa. It is potentially a powder keg for Africa. We hope that next year's elections go well and that Nigeria can resume some sort of normality, although I am not entirely convinced that that is possible. In the north, Christians, Shi'a Muslims and members of traditional African religions have been targeted by Boko Haram and Daesh; and in the middle belt, Fulani herders have attacked primarily Christian communities. In the last 10 years, nearly 40,000 people have been killed in Nigeria. That is an incredible number. It is the population of my town of Newtownards back home, and I can just imagine what it would mean with nobody living in that town. What does it mean for other hon. Members here who can visualise what 40,000 deaths would mean in their constituency? In the last two years alone—I will cite the figure that is put about—at least 7,520 Christians have been killed in Nigeria.

In addition to those deaths, Nigeria has more than 3 million internally displaced persons living in camps and informal settlements. In May of this year, we visited Nigeria through the APPG. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and I were in the deputation together and we saw the situation at first hand. Some of those displaced people have been in camps for seven and a half years. It is depressing to know that they have been there for that length of time and have not moved on—they have not had the opportunity.

There are things that perhaps Nigeria could do and the UN could do as well. Perhaps the UK could also be part of that. For example, there is some land available in Nigeria. There, these farmers—Christian farmers—could have land and cultivate it and play a physical, practical role in building a future and looking after their families. These are things that could happen.

Religious minorities are often excluded from larger camps due to discrimination or fears of additional attacks. That leads to traumatised groups unable to access humanitarian aid and being denied access to development programmes. Much of the funding for those programmes comes from UK aid. We should have a responsibility to ensure that aid does not discriminate against Christian or Shi'a groups unable to access it through larger IDP camps.

The figures for this situation are really disturbing. The scale of it is colossal and hard to picture, so let me share just two stories from our trip. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute will remember these. He will remember many, because we all remember many, but I am going to give two examples, if I may, of the horror that Nigeria is for those people of ethnic and religious belief.

In one village that was attacked, we heard a story of a young mother and her six-year-old daughter. They had tried to run away, and she was surrounded and caught by the attackers. The attackers then turned their machetes on the mother and said, "Your girl would like to suck

[Jim Shannon]

your finger,” and proceeded to cut off her forefinger. Of course, the lady passed out through the pain and the horror, but once she came to some time later, she found that her six-year-old girl was dead beside her, with her mother’s fingers stuck in her mouth. That is the horror of Nigeria today for those of a Christian belief and those of another ethnic minority belief. In another attack, there was an elderly lady to whom the attackers said, “Oh grandma, you look cold,” and then they threw her into a burning home, where she died. This is the horrible brutality, violence and criminality of those in Nigeria.

A few weeks ago, it was Red Wednesday and we had a photograph done. Mr Paisley, I think you were there; indeed, I know that many here were also there. I met Bishop Jude of Ondo. He visited Parliament and told the story of the attack on St Francis Xavier Catholic church in Ondo state on Pentecost this year in which terrorists killed 51 worshippers. Bishop Jude highlighted the fact that in the short term the effects of violence against Christian communities are the loss of life and the spreading of terror and displacement, and that in the medium to long term these attacks are devastating communities, who lose access to healthcare, education and jobs, all of which ultimately makes it impossible for many communities to survive.

In 2019, the all-party group published a report that highlighted the issues, titled “Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?” The question was important, as the report documented genocidal activities happening in the country—not just the deliberate killings of Christians and Shi’as but the vast scale of the killings, the destruction of settlements and places of worship, which forced those groups out of parts of Nigeria, and the targeting and abduction of children with the intent of transferring them out of those communities. More work is needed from the international community to fully investigate those crimes and to answer the important questions of intent, and whether it is a deliberate, systematic approach to eradicate certain communities from parts of Nigeria.

We had opportunities to meet those in different Departments. The APPG believes that His Majesty’s Government need to put pressure on the Nigerian authorities to stop such attacks happening. They can do it. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute and I well recall an attack that was carried out in a village in eastern Nigeria. The army camp was no more than a few hundred yards away. Those in the camp made no effort whatever to stop the killing, murder, violence and abuse of women and girls that took place, within shouting distance of them, which tells us that they could do better. We must do everything that we can to bring the perpetrators of terrorist violence and killings to account.

Particular attention is needed to protect those who are most vulnerable to abduction, particularly women and girls. The right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North referred to that, and it is important that it is addressed. Provision also needs to be established to help to restore and rebuild those communities, and we need to ensure that UK aid does not indirectly discriminate against them. Aid must reach all those who need it the most. The hon. Members for Congleton and for Rhondda referred to China, which received £68.4 million in aid last year, yet is guilty of some of the worst human rights

abuses in the world. I would not give it aid, and I encourage our Government not to do so. From 2016 to 2020, India received £1.9 billion in aid, yet its abuse and persecution of those in that country of the Christian or Muslim faith is outrageous. It is time that we looked at where aid goes and make countries accountable. Others referred to where aid could be better used. It could be used in countries where human rights mean something, and freedom of religious belief means something.

Actions to prevent, protect, prosecute and restore, alongside ensuring that our foreign policy and international aid is FORB-literate, provide a model for protecting the rights of religious minorities. That is relevant to not just Nigeria but some of the worst human rights abusers across the world. We have heard about many of them. They include Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Iran, North Korea and many others. Apart from being morally right, protecting FORB has many benefits. Countries that do so are more stable and have lower levels of corruption and higher levels of economic output. Conversely, countries that start scapegoating or attacking religious minorities are often taking their first steps to a more authoritarian Government, paving the way for broader human rights abuses against free speech, freedom of assembly and the fundamental rights of all our citizens.

I am pleased to speak in the debate, and hope that the Minister will be able to give us some encouragement and succour on how aid can be better used. We are privileged and honoured to be Members of Parliament, but I believe, as I know others do, that we have to be a voice for the voiceless. Today, this House has been just that.

3.19 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); not many people get to do that in this place, but it is my privilege today.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on securing such an important and valuable debate, and on her long-standing commitment to these issues. I will probably end up echoing much of what others have already said, but that demonstrates the cross-party consensus that exists on these issues, and the importance of the Government paying attention to them. On the issue of ministerial corrections and the exchange on Saudi Arabia, the Procedure Committee is currently looking into how the record is corrected appropriately. We will make a point of drawing that particular correction to the attention of the inquiry.

As others have said, Saturday marks Human Rights Day and the beginning of a year of activism and activity, culminating in the 75th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights on 10 December 2023. The fundamental human rights set out in that declaration are just that: fundamental and intrinsic to every single human being. As we have heard throughout the debate, rights can be—and all too often are—denied, suppressed or not exercised. But they still exist at a fundamental level. Those rights belong to all of us, individually and collectively. In some senses, when they are denied to one person or one group of people, we are all diminished. We all have a responsibility to seek justice and restoration of those rights for all.

This issue is of huge concern to constituents in Glasgow North. I am proud to represent one of the biggest and most active Amnesty International groups in the country, based in Glasgow's west end. I congratulate the group on its ongoing work. Many of those constituents will be taking part in Amnesty's "Write for Rights" campaign at this time of year. I have vivid memories of first attending an Amnesty talk as a young person. It was about prisoners of conscience and the significant impact that writing to detained people and Governments to support their freedom can have. In some ways, it is a real privilege to be able to put those points directly to the UK Government years later.

I echo the cases highlighted by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), particularly Aleksandra Skochilenko in Russia and Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara in Cuba. We heard about both of those significant cases in the Jubilee Room earlier this week. I echo the calls of my constituents and other Members here today for the UK Government to make representations to their counterparts in those countries, asking for justice and the release of those prisoners. Equally, I echo calls for efforts to secure the return of UK nationals arbitrarily detained abroad, including Morad Tahbaz and Mehran Raoof in Iran, Alaa Abd El-Fattah in Egypt and Jagtar Singh Johal in India.

Another regular topic in my constituency inbox is the situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Yesterday, some of us had the opportunity to witness some of the tragic acts of settler violence that take place there on a daily basis, using virtual reality technology brought to a room in Portcullis House by Yachad and B'Tselem. Both organisations should be congratulated for their efforts to work across communities in the Holy Land to bring about a peaceful political resolution to the conflict. It is interesting how this technology is being used to help us understand human rights abuses around the world. A few weeks ago, I, my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and no doubt many others also used it to better understand the experience of the Yazidis, who the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke about so powerfully.

I also hear from constituents, including some with direct personal experience, about the importance of supporting campaigners who support women, life and freedom in Iran. The decision of the Iranian regime to execute dozens or more protesters stands in contrast to the inspiring and determined action of the ordinary citizens standing up against brutality and dictatorship. I have already written to the Foreign Secretary about these matters on behalf of my constituents, but perhaps the Minister could say a bit more about how the Government are continuing to support the UN Human Rights Council's fact-finding mission on human rights violations in Iran, and what steps they are taking to ensure that people associated with the actions of the Iranian regime here in the UK are not afforded any kind of sanctuary, protection or impunity.

The Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), mentioned the exhibition in Upper Waiting Hall that has drawn attention this week to the journalists and activists in Eritrea who were rounded up by their country's regime in 2001 and have never been heard from since. We were fortunate to welcome the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea, Dr Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker, to the Jubilee

Room earlier this week and to hear directly from him about the ongoing efforts to document the terrible human rights abuses in Eritrea and the steps being taken to hold that Government to account. Eritreans make up one of the largest populations of refugees in this country—indeed, that is the case in many countries—because their claims to asylum are so clear and so many of them have to flee for their lives.

Jeremy Corbyn: A recent Westminster Hall debate focused on Ethiopia, particularly the situation in Tigray. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to keep the pressure up on the Ethiopian Government to ensure that human rights observers from the United Nations Human Rights Council have absolutely unfettered access to all parts of the country?

Patrick Grady: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Sadly, many of those observers do not have the access they require and to which they have a right under an international mandate.

In Scotland, we welcome refugees and are proud to have them in our communities, but people should not have to flee oppression and brutality, so more must be done to call out the practices of the Eritrean regime and, indeed, other regimes in that part of the world. On top of all that, the horn of Africa in East Africa is undergoing a severe food crisis. Right now, more than 19 million people are directly affected by chronic food shortages, but the right to adequate food, water, sanitation and clothing is declared under article 25 of the universal declaration of human rights. Several of us have been to see Save the Children today, its Christmas jumper day, on which it is raising awareness of food insecurity overseas and, sadly, increasingly in the United Kingdom. Also, as the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) has said, the UK Government's massive cuts to the aid budget are sadly making it much more difficult to respond adequately to the food crisis in the horn of Africa, in a way that might have been possible in the past.

As others have said, there is some irony in the fact that we are using these debates to ask the UK Government to take action on human rights abuses around the world at a time when the legal framework on human rights in this country seems to be under threat. I have heard from a significant number of constituents who are deeply concerned about the so-called Bill of Rights, which is technically before this House, although there is no clear timetable for Second Reading or any further stages. The Bill as published would diminish the rights of those seeking sanctuary here in the UK. It would remove obligations on some public authorities to respect existing rights and make it much more difficult to seek recourse from the courts when rights are threatened. The best thing the Government could do with this Bill is bin it, leave it in the legislative doldrums and let it disappear at the end of the Session.

Constituents are also concerned that there might be attempts to change provisions and protections for certain minority groups in the Equality Act 2010, despite there being no particularly clear need for that to happen. I share the concerns about the ever-growing drumbeat on the Tory Back Benches, and even within the Cabinet, for withdrawal from the European convention on human rights, as the right hon. Member for Islington North

[Patrick Grady]

(Jeremy Corbyn) said. Indeed, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, that may well have an impact on the ability of the devolved legislatures and Governments to exercise their statutory rights and obligations under the terms of their founding Acts. That leads me to the same question that the right hon. Member for Islington North asked: how can such actions by the UK Government lend them any kind of international credibility when they are attempting to speak out against human rights abuses elsewhere in the world?

If the Government really want to legislate in the area of human rights, perhaps they could consider proposals for a new UK supply chain regulation: a business, human rights and environment Act that would require companies to take reasonable measures to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for the actual and potential impacts of their activities on people and the environment. In Brazil, Colombia, which the hon. Member for Rhondda referred to, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and many other resource and mineral-rich countries, too many people are forced to work in almost slave-like conditions or are having their land seized for mining and monocropping to provide consumer goods for those of us who already live in comfort and plenty.

As other Members have said, many of the issues that we have discussed today are the focus of a range of all-party parliamentary groups, particularly the all-party parliamentary human rights group. Unlike some APPGs, these are often supported by volunteers, charitable groups and Members' staff, who are effectively donating their time on a pro bono basis. They provide valuable information for debates such as this, and for those of us who are active members. We thank them sincerely for their work. They help us to hold the Government to account and to make sure, as I hope the Minister will confirm, that the Government will remain committed to protecting and enhancing fundamental human rights, both around the world and here at home.

3.30 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. This afternoon's debate marks United Nations Human Rights Day, which, as we have heard, is on the theme of dignity, freedom and justice for all. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for securing the debate, and I congratulate all Members on their many thoughtful and challenging contributions.

As we have heard, 10 December is the day each year that we celebrate the United Nations' landmark document, the universal declaration of human rights, which I am told is the most translated document in the world—it is currently available in 500 languages. I just wish more people had read it, because, as we have heard so often today, the harsh and disturbing truth is that, while we may all take those fundamental rights of dignity, freedom and justice for all for granted, those of us across the world who believe passionately in human rights, dignity, freedom and justice are in a minority in 2022. By any measure, 2022 has not been a good year for human rights, as attacks based on race, skin colour, religion, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity or whatever else continue to rise in just about every part of the world.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West opened the debate by encouraging us in this place to use our platform to help survivors of human rights abuses, and to ensure that we never adopt a two-tier system, turning a blind eye to what friends, allies or potential trade partners may do and treating them differently from countries or non-state actors that we regard as enemies or that regard us as hostile. She was absolutely right to do so.

I was pleased that the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who unfortunately is no longer in her place, reminded us—as we all knew she would—that freedom of religion or belief is a basic, fundamental human right that cannot, and must not, be separated from any discussions we have on human rights. I am also glad that she brought the issue of genocide to the debate; it is something we have talked about, and I will return to it later in my speech. I, too, thoroughly recommend Lord Alton and Dr Ewelina Ochab's excellent book on the subject.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) highlighted that the UK Government have yet to formally condemn the Saudi regime for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, despite the overwhelming evidence that they committed it. The Government would do well to reflect on what the hon. Member said: no one will respect us when they know what we think but also that we are too afraid to say what we think.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) talked about the human rights situation in Bahrain, and I join him in paying tribute to the work of the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, which campaigns tirelessly on behalf of political prisoners in that country. I share—and indeed have put on record alongside him—the serious concerns he expressed about UK taxpayers funding the Bahrain regime through the Gulf strategy fund.

The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) rightly asked why a debate as important as this is taking place in Westminster Hall on a Thursday afternoon. Why is it not on the Floor of the main Chamber, and why is it not in Government time? He was also right to ask where the Government's human rights report is, and I thank him for his wise words on the plight of asylum seekers and the dismal response that we all too often have to that subject.

The right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) raised the issue of women in Afghanistan—which I will come back to—and I met representatives of the Hazara community just yesterday. The right hon. Member is right that anyone who saw that awful video of a woman being beaten savagely by a man will know that—as we all suspected—the Taliban have not changed one iota. I am also pleased that she brought up the appalling sexual violence that we increasingly hear is being perpetrated by all sides in the conflict in Tigray.

A moment of panic ran through the Chamber at 29 minutes past the hour, when the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was not in his place and we thought we would have to suspend proceedings and send out a search party, so I am happy that he is here. He is always in his place to amplify the message that human rights and freedom of religion or belief walk hand in hand, and he is right. I was privileged to join him on a visit to Nigeria earlier this year, and what we

saw was an impoverished, fast-growing, young population coupled with a deeply corrupt federal Government, which is sowing the seeds for radical Islam. The UK Government must understand the powder keg that is Nigeria, as the hon. Gentleman described it, and I urge them to do everything they possibly can.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) was absolutely right to say that an attack on anyone's human rights is an attack on everyone's human rights. I was delighted that he raised the plight of the Palestinian communities and the suffering they face every single day. I also echo his words that Scotland welcomes refugees; I am pleased that our Government are doing their duty by those fleeing oppression and violence.

It has been a depressing look back through my calendar over the last 12 months and at the people I have met. That tells me that the situation is getting worse and worse. I have met indigenous people from Colombia, whose land and rivers are being stolen by multinational companies. Human rights defenders there are also being killed at an appalling rate. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Yazidis, I speak frequently to the Yazidi community—yet, after the defeat of Daesh, 2,700 women and girls are still missing and have been sold into sexual slavery. I met representatives of Palestinian civic society, who are appalled at how the expansion of illegal settlements in the west bank is driving Palestinian communities from their homes.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on democracy and human rights in the Gulf, I am in constant contact with the FCDO about the situation in Bahrain and the widespread use of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia. Just yesterday, I met Dr May Homira Rezai, the chair of the Hazara Committee in UK, to hear about the situation of women at the hands of the Taliban. Along with many others, I have met representatives of the Hong Kong community to hear how the fundamental rights they were promised are being undermined and dismantled by the Chinese state. Just two weeks ago, I chaired a meeting with the Tigrayan community here to hear first-hand testimonies from survivors about unimaginable sexual violence. Yesterday I met the Ukrainian ambassador, who told us that 12,000 Ukrainian children had been kidnapped and transported out of the country and have now been adopted by Russian families. That is a heinous crime, reminiscent of what Daesh did to Yazidi children.

Tomorrow, 9 December, is the International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime. The Genocide convention, which will be 75 years old next year, spells out the legal obligation that a state has to prevent genocide and punish the perpetrators. Some 74 years after it was introduced, who would have believed that genocide would be back on the continent of Europe? The Government want to be leaders in genocide prevention, but if they want to stop us being here again, saying, "Never again" to genocide, there must be a strategy. Hoping that it will not happen again is not a substitute for a real genocide prevention strategy. Next week, we will launch a new APPG on international law, justice and accountability with the support of colleagues in both Houses, including Baroness Helena Kennedy KC and Lord David Alton, and the International Bar Association. We hope to help fill that gap that exists in the Government's genocide prevention strategy.

I am running rapidly out of time, but I wish to again thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West and all those who have made such valuable contributions to the debate. I hope the Government have listened to what has been said.

3.40 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for securing such an important debate to mark Human Rights Day. I think we would all agree that we have had an excellent, thoughtful and illuminating debate. On 10 December, we will mark 74 years since the introduction of the universal declaration of human rights in the aftermath of the horror of the second world war. The international community came together to declare that rights belong to each and every human being equally throughout the world—a point well made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady)—but, 74 years on, human rights are under attack across the world.

As has been mentioned, parliamentary colleagues and I attended the Amnesty International UK drop-in on Tuesday, where we heard about four cases of individuals that highlighted human rights abuses. We heard about the case of Hong Kong human rights lawyer and activist Chow Hang-tung, who is serving 22 months in prison for daring to encourage people on social media to light candles to commemorate those who lost their lives in the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. We heard about the case of Dorgelesse Nguessan, a hairdresser from Cameroon who was arrested on her first ever protest in September 2020 for voicing her concerns about the Cameroonian Government's handling of the economy. Her peaceful protest resulted in her arrest and charges of insurrection, assembly, meetings and public demonstration, which resulted in a five-year sentence. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) highlighted the other two cases: that of the Russian artist Sasha Skochilenko, who was arrested and is being held without charge for protesting Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and that of the Cuban artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, who was arrested for posting that he wanted to attend a big demonstration in Cuba.

Chris Bryant: There are two other Russians we ought to acknowledge—these are high-profile cases, and have regularly been spoken about in the House, although they can sometimes get ignored. One is Vladimir Kara-Murza, who is in prison in Russia, and the other is Alexei Navalny, who seems to have been imprisoned for being poisoned by the Russian state. These are people of phenomenal courage, and we should not forget them.

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend is right to highlight those cases, and he is right that we should never forget them.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) highlighted the case of Zarifa Yaqoubi and her four colleagues, who were arrested at the inauguration of the Afghan Women's Movement for Equality by the Taliban, which is obviously trying to suppress women's freedom in Afghanistan. We would very much support their instant release from detention for protesting for women's rights in Afghanistan.

[Bambos Charalambous]

As the shadow Minister for the middle east and north Africa, I have raised numerous cases of concern about human rights abuses in the region, ranging from those of democracy advocates in Tunisia and Bahrain and those of people facing execution in Saudi Arabia, to those of Palestinians evicted from their homes in the occupied territories and facing attacks from settlers. I too attended the B'Tselem and Yachad event yesterday, where social media allowed us to witness what Palestinians facing settler violence experienced.

Today I want to focus particularly on Iran, where none of us can fail to be moved by the bravery of the protesters—women and girls who are fighting back against the repressive regime that seeks to limit their basic freedoms in every aspect of their lives. Serious human rights violations at the hands of the Iranian authorities have been documented time and again. Unlawful killings following the unwarranted use of lethal force, as well as mass arbitrary arrests and detentions, forced disappearances, torture and sexual violence, have all been documented. The protesters have been extraordinary. Their courage in facing a regime that is willing to use extreme violence against protesters and that has sentenced some protesters to death is truly inspiring, and I was horrified to learn today that the first protester condemned to death has been executed, which is deeply worrying. We cannot just pay tribute to their courage; we must stand with them by supporting access to free media. BBC Persian Radio, which is under threat, must be able to continue reporting. True solidarity means supporting Iranian civil society. The UK Government must do more to speak up for those who stand up for human rights in Iran.

Turning to Egypt, I have been privileged to meet the family of Alaa Abd el-Fattah. Alaa is a British-Egyptian human rights defender and an activist who has been in prison for his belief that all Egyptians deserve to have their human rights respected by their Government. Alaa is a prisoner of conscience and had until very recently been on hunger strike for over 200 days. His spirit and endless commitment to the values of freedom, human rights and democracy should inspire us all. Alaa needs our solidarity and the backing of our Government, yet his family have said that the UK Government have failed to act with sufficient urgency.

The UK must ensure that all UK nationals have a right to consular assistance when detained abroad. I am proud that that is a Labour policy, but it is also something that the Government can and should deliver. It should not be a party political issue. The Prime Minister raised Alaa's case directly with President Sisi, yet there has been no progress since. Consular access to a British citizen is still being denied, and Alaa is no closer to being released. Will the Minister tell me what meaningful steps the Government are taking to gain access to Alaa and to help secure his release?

We live in a world where homosexuality is a criminal offence in 71 countries and is punishable by death in 11 of those, and where sex outside marriage and criticism of the king are criminal offences. We also live in a world where girls are banned from going to school in some countries. I wish to put on the record my support for the

Education Cannot Wait campaign, which tries to get children in conflict zones into school, and it works incredibly hard to do that.

We live in a world where gender-based violence still occurs and where freedom of expression and freedom of religious belief are curtailed. We heard from the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) about where that has resulted in genocide on occasions. Again, that is truly appalling and something we need to stand up against and challenge.

We have heard about how we live in a world where press freedom is curtailed and workers are exploited. Again, we need to stand up and speak up for the right to press freedom and workers' rights, which are also part of the universal declaration of human rights.

The universal declaration of human rights remains a document that inspires activists and human rights defenders across the world. It is a shining example of what the international community can achieve when we come together with a clear aspiration for a fairer future. More than ever, the simple idea of inviolable rights that allow each of us to live in decency and dignity must be at the forefront of our democracy. Human rights are violated across the world, yet the courage of human rights defenders reminds us that the ideal of the fundamental dignity of all human beings is not lost. We must always defend it.

It is a shame that, even in the UK, there has been some curtailing of the long-standing fundamental right to protest. Protests can be inconvenient, but that is the point. We all have the right to freedom of expression and to freedom of assembly, and restricting those rights restricts citizens' rights to express our discontent with the Government. The restriction of such fundamental liberties is of grave concern. The right hon. Member for Islington North said that we cannot lecture the world on human rights when the UK is watering down its own rights.

We must not forget article 14: everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. Seeking asylum is not a crime and must never be treated as such. We have a human duty to respect the fundamental human rights of asylum seekers, and all migrants, wherever they come from. Respect for human rights must be the fundamental starting point for any Government. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about the UK Government's report on human rights, which many right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned. We need to know when that report will be published, because it is long overdue.

We in the Labour party are clear in our commitments to respect human rights and international law. We should be proud of international institutions and NGOs that highlight the human rights abuses that still go on today. We need to ensure that the UK Government call out human rights abuses, wherever they occur, and that they hold to account those committing those abuses. The need to stand up for human rights is more important today than ever before.

3.50 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for securing this important debate.

The shared passion across this House for protecting and promoting human rights is clear, warranted and, of course, warmly welcomed. Where I am not able to answer the questions raised by colleagues, I commit to writing to them with more detail as soon as possible.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) noted, this weekend we mark International Human Rights Day just as the United Nations launches a year-long campaign to promote the 75th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights. The UK has a long-standing commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights across the globe. My noble Friend Lord Ahmad, the Minister responsible for human rights at the FCDO, will host an event at the FCDO to shine a light on those issues. I pay tribute to him for his continuing commitment in this area.

As the Prime Minister set out recently, our approach is anchored by our enduring belief in freedom, openness and the rule of law. We are committed to being a force for good in the world, with human rights, open societies, democracy and the international rule of law acting as our guiding lights. We put human rights at the heart of what we do, which is why we established the UK's global human rights sanctions regime; why we led efforts to refer the shocking activities against human rights in Ukraine to the International Criminal Court; why we lead on UN Human Rights Council resolutions, including on the situation in Syria and South Sudan; and why we have made a joint statement on Xinjiang.

We pursue three broad strands of work to promote and protect human rights globally. First, we work through multilateral bodies. Secondly, we work directly with states to encourage and support them in upholding their human rights obligations. Thirdly, we have concerted campaigns to drive forward action on issues of particular concern.

I will speak first about our multilateral work. The international rules-based system is critical to protecting and realising the human rights and freedoms of people all over the world. We work through the multilateral system to encourage all states to uphold their international human rights obligations, and to hold to account those who violate human rights.

In September, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad spoke at the United Nations and urged the international community to hold Iran accountable for systemically targeting members of minority communities; to press Afghanistan to protect minorities who are targeted for their beliefs; to challenge the discriminatory provisions in Myanmar's citizenship laws; and to hold China to account for its egregious human rights violations in Xinjiang. In November, we supported a successful UN Human Rights Council resolution to establish a UN investigation of the Iranian regime's appalling human rights violations during recent protests.

Turning to our bilateral work, we are strengthening our economic, diplomatic and security ties, and building a network of partnerships with countries united by the values of freedom, human rights and the rule of law. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) raised concerns about the FCDO Gulf strategy fund. I hope I can reassure him that projects in Bahrain focus on a variety of capacity-building programmes, including programmes supporting the implementation of juvenile justice law, and on human rights and diplomacy training.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West raised the issue of political representation in Bahrain. While challenges remain, there has been significant progress over a number of years. With UK support, recent elections saw some positive progress on female representation; eight out of 40 elected politicians are now female.

FCDO Ministers and officials continue to raise concerns with Governments who have a poor track record on upholding human rights. Many colleagues raised concerns about Saudi Arabia's death penalty policy. My noble Friend Lord Ahmad regularly raises our concerns with Saudi authorities, and he raised specific cases just two weeks ago with the ambassador. We have been clear that the appalling murder of Jamal Khashoggi was a terrible crime, and we have imposed sanctions on 20 Saudis involved in it.

In Ukraine, harrowing reports of atrocities by Vladimir Putin's forces continue to emerge. The Government will continue to stand with Ukraine in its fight for freedom, and will continue to hold Russia to account. We have committed £220 million of humanitarian support since February, which makes us the third largest bilateral donor. We have also created the Atrocity Crimes Advisory Group, alongside our allies from the European Union and the United States.

Chris Bryant: Obviously, I agree with a lot of what the Minister is saying, but several Members have asked when the next Government human rights annual report will be produced, because we have not had one for nearly 18 months.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman anticipates my speech. Shall I make him wait? I think I shall have to make him wait.

Chris Bryant: That's not very nice.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: It is character-building.

Chris Bryant: I was nice.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I do not disagree.

In China, there are continuing reports of human rights violations against Uyghur Muslims and other minorities. There has also been increasing pressure on media freedom and growing assaults on Hong Kong's autonomy and freedom. We raise our concerns at the highest levels with the Chinese Government. We have imposed sanctions, provided guidance to businesses, introduced enhanced export controls and announced penalties under the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

Jim Shannon: I referred to the aid that the UK gives China—£64.6 million in the past year. Why are we giving China aid when it totally ignores human rights and persecution issues? Forgive me for being so direct, but I think it is time we stopped it.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I do not have the data to hand, but I signed off a parliamentary question to another colleague that set out clearly that none of that funding goes to the Chinese Government. It is mostly for working with them on third-country issues and climate change, but I will ensure that the breakdown is sent to the hon. Gentleman, because it is important that we are clear that that is not how we are spending the money. We are working together where we can to tackle some of those wider issues. I will ensure that the detail is sent to him.

[*Anne-Marie Trevelyan*]

We are also working in our international fora to continue to shine a spotlight on violations and to hold China to account. We are not shy of being a critical friend where we need to be. In October, our global diplomatic effort helped to secure the support of 50 countries for a further joint statement on Xinjiang at the UN General Assembly.

Under the Magnitsky sanctions, the UK announced new sanctions against four Chinese Government officials and an entity responsible for enforcing the repressive security policies across Xinjiang. We will continue to act in concert with our likeminded partners to ensure that those responsible for gross human rights violations are brought to account.

I hope that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland will be reassured to hear that on 24 November, the Government announced that companies subject to the national intelligence law of the People's Republic of China should not be able to supply surveillance systems to sensitive Government sites. The Procurement Bill will further strengthen the ability of public sector bodies to exclude suppliers where there is a concern about human rights.

The Taliban continues to repress viciously the rights of Afghans, particularly women and girls and others from marginalised groups. The right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) set out vividly some of the appalling human rights abuses being inflicted by the Taliban.

Jeremy Corbyn: Obviously, I concur with the Minister's view about the abuse of human rights in Afghanistan—I am sure we all agree about that—but the reality is that Afghanistan is desperately poor, and people are literally starving. What can the Government do to ensure that there is some kind of operation getting food into Afghanistan? Obviously, that would require some degree of co-operation, one way or another, with the de facto Government.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I do not have the exact figures to hand, but we work closely with international groups such as the World Food Programme to find tools to address those incredibly urgent and difficult issues. I will ensure that the right hon. Gentleman gets the details, which I do not have to hand.

The challenge quite rightly set by many colleagues today is that it is difficult to have direct interventions with the Taliban at the moment. However, our UK officials, including the excellent chargé d'affaires of the UK mission to Afghanistan, regularly raise human rights concerns, alongside colleagues in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, with the Taliban. That includes concerns about breaches of women's rights, particularly regarding girls' education, where there is an appalling gap for the whole country that will have such a long tail. We also regularly raise the issue of freedom of expression for members of minority groups. The Government have repeatedly condemned the Taliban's decision to restrict the rights of women and girls, including through our public statements, through the UN Security Council, and through Human Rights Council resolutions—most recently on 19 October.

Let me respond to the question about Egypt and Alaa Abd El-Fattah raised by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). The UK Government are providing consular support to Alaa Abd El-Fattah's family, and the Foreign Secretary spoke to the family on 2 November. Lord Ahmad has met the family several times, most recently on 5 December. The embassy in Cairo and consular officials continue to engage regularly with the family, and we continue to urgently seek consular access to visit Mr El-Fattah. He is a British citizen. We are challenged by the Egyptians' claim that their legal process for recognising dual nationality has not been completed, but we continue to press for consular access.

The Government continue to advance a range of wider human rights priority issues. Our annual human rights and democracy reports are an important part of that work, and colleagues will be pleased to know that we will publish the 2021 report imminently.

Chris Bryant: Well, that could be forever.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Would you be happy with next week?

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I am sorry, Mr Paisley; it was just too tempting.

At the end of November, the Foreign Secretary hosted an international ministerial conference on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative. We brought together survivors and representatives of civil society and countries to share learning and drive a stronger global response that will prevent and respond to sexual violence in conflict. We have also published a new three-year strategy, which is backed up by a £12.5 million funding pool.

In October, the UK co-led a landmark joint statement at the UN that commits to protecting and promoting sexual and reproductive health, rights and bodily autonomy, and 71 countries signed the statement.

Chris Bryant: Now that we have had one victory this afternoon, will the Minister explain why the UK has sanctioned some people who ran the Evin prison in Iran but not others, and why we have yet to sanction the Iranian revolutionary guard corps?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we do not discuss sanctions policy because it would risk reducing our ability to bring in the sanctions that we want, but his comments are noted. I am thankful to him for his continuing leadership on the issue across the House. He genuinely has been an important ally in helping us to move forwards.

Earlier in the year, we hosted an international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief. I put on record my—and I am sure all colleagues'—thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who speaks with such wisdom and care as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. The conference brought together over 800 faith and belief leaders with human rights experts and 100 Government delegations to agree action to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief. New funding has also been committed to provide legal expertise and support for defenders of freedom of religion or belief.

Mr Paisley, you were not here earlier—Dame Maria was in the Chair—but I know that you would agree with the incredibly generous comments of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), which were followed up by others, about the young women of Iran. They are standing up for a better future that is free of repression, and they deserve our unerring and loud support. On 14 November, we announced 24 new sanctions on leading political and security officials involved in the current crackdown. The bravery of the young women is genuinely humbling, and we will continue to do all that we can to support them. I take note of the hon. Member's particular identification of the matter.

As a long-standing champion of human rights and freedoms, the United Kingdom Government have not only a duty but a deep commitment to continuing to promote and defend our values of equality, inclusion and respect both at home and abroad. The passionate commitment of all colleagues who spoke today is a critical part of the UK's leadership and determination to defend and champion human rights across the world, working with friends and like-minded Governments and alongside campaign groups and individuals. The UK Government will continue to work with all those voices to advocate for human rights everywhere.

4.5 pm

Margaret Ferrier: I think we would all agree that we have had a very good debate. Next year, on 10 December 2023, the universal declaration of human rights will celebrate its 75th anniversary. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) asked why this debate is not in the Chamber this year. Hopefully, we

will be ahead of the curve next year, and will get more Members involved, so that the debate can take place in the Chamber.

It is a shame that after so many years, we still need to highlight human rights abuses around the world, but it is absolutely imperative that we continue to do so. I had written a list of the countries that everybody mentioned, but it is too long for me to go through. I got to 29, and I probably missed some. I conclude by reflecting on this year's theme, which other Members have mentioned: dignity, freedom and justice for all. Those six short words summarise what we are fighting for, together with so many others across the world.

I thank every hon. and right hon. Member who has taken part, including the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), and the right hon. Members for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and for Islington North. Finally, I thank the Minister for her considered reply to the points raised. I hope that by next December we will have made more strides forward, and will have something to celebrate on the 75th anniversary.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered International Human Rights Day 2022.

4.7 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 8 December 2022

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telecoms Diversification: International Co-operation

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): I would like to inform the House that today the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is announcing a joint statement on telecoms diversification alongside the Governments of Australia, Canada and the United States of America. This further progresses His Majesty's Government's efforts to build global support for our approach to telecoms diversification and identify tangible opportunities for collaboration with a range of international partners as set out in the 5G supply chain diversification strategy in 2020, and following the recommendations of the telecoms diversification taskforce in 2021.

The joint statement marks the one-year anniversary of the 2021 Prague proposals on telecommunications supplier diversity, to which our four Governments have reaffirmed our commitment. It also announces the endorsement of the UK's open RAN principles by the Governments of Australia, Canada and the United States of America, which I would like to welcome.

Collectively, these Governments hold a shared view that open and interoperable solutions could help to create a more diverse, competitive and innovative telecoms supply market. To support this we intend to work together across a number of areas ranging from sharing information on our respective policy approaches to supporting greater transparency in industry-led standard-setting processes. We also intend to seek ongoing support from other likeminded countries truly to realise the benefits of a diverse telecoms supply chain on a global scale.

This announcement builds on the strong progress we have made to increase the resilience and security of the UK's telecoms critical national infrastructure since the publication of the 5G supply chain diversification strategy, which is backed by the £250 million open networks fund committed at the 2021 spending review. The fund aims to accelerate the adoption of open RAN solutions as a means to diversify the market. It includes research and development interventions of up to £36 million for the Future RAN Competition, up to £25 million for the Future Open Networks Research Challenge, as well as funding for testing facilities such as the SmartRAN Open Networks Interoperability Centre, and the UK Telecoms Lab. HM Government has also previously announced a joint ambition with UK mobile network operators to increase the share of open and interoperable equipment in UK networks by 2030. Indeed, we are also seeing positive progress from industry, for example, Vodafone and Telefonica have now deployed their first live open RAN sites, with both using new market entrants.

While there is still more to do, today represents a significant milestone in the Government's efforts to grow international consensus on telecoms diversification. In order to support a lasting and meaningful change it

will be crucial for the global community to work together. I am grateful to the Governments of Australia, Canada and the United States of America and look forward to working with them, along with partners around the world, to achieve our vision of a more innovative, competitive and diverse telecoms supply market. Full details of the announcement will be published on www.gov.uk today.

[HCWS423]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Devolution: England

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): The levelling-up White Paper set out the Government's ambition that, by 2030, every part of England that wants one will have a devolution deal with powers at or approaching the highest level of devolution and a simplified, long-term funding settlement. Stronger, more empowered, and more accountable local leadership is core to our levelling-up mission, to delivering on the ground, to growing our local economies and to improving public services.

In summer 2022, the Government concluded devolution deals with York and North Yorkshire, and that part of the east midlands which includes Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, and Nottinghamshire. Subject to the ongoing local consultations and satisfactory completion of the statutory processes, including local consent by the councils and parliamentary approval of the secondary legislation to implement the deals, the inaugural mayoral elections are planned for May 2024. The east midlands deal is also dependent on the enactment of provisions in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill necessary for the establishment of the proposed East Midlands mayoral combined county authority.

The Government have now concluded three more devolution deals with Cornwall, Norfolk and Suffolk. These are the first set of the new county deals that extend devolution to more of England. Each deal will result in the election of a Mayor or directly elected leader to champion the area with Government and business. These deals are subject to locally run consultations, resolution by each of Cornwall Council, Suffolk County Council and Norfolk County Council to change their governance models so that electors directly elect the council leader, and to the satisfactory conclusion of the statutory processes, including local consent from the councils and parliamentary approval to the secondary legislation to implement the deals. Inaugural elections for a Mayor or directly elected leader in each of the areas are planned for May 2024. They will have the choice of alternative titles to "Mayor" for these elections, subject to provisions in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill being enacted.

These five new devolution deals will drive forward improved outcomes for the 5 million people that live in those areas. Taken together, they take the proportion of England now covered by a devolution deal to above 50% for the first time. They will deliver new funding including long-term investment funds to invest in local priorities that drive growth and levelling up, totalling over £3 billion over 30 years.

The Government are also in advanced negotiations on a north east devolution deal that will supersede the current North of Tyne combined authority that covers only Newcastle, North Tyneside and Northumberland. A deal is expected to be concluded shortly and further details will be announced.

Negotiations on trailblazer deeper devolution deals with the west midlands and Greater Manchester combined authorities are progressing well and expected to conclude early in 2023. These deals seek to devolve further powers in areas such as skills, transport, housing and net zero, alongside potential department-style single funding settlements and stronger accountability focused on outcomes. They will act as a blueprint for other areas to follow. We are interested in other MCAs coming forward with ideas for new functions. We will begin talks with other MCAs on deeper devolution from next year. The Government will set out more on plans for those talks soon.

Effective devolution requires local leaders and institutions that are transparent and accountable. This is why the Government will be publishing the devolution accountability framework in early 2023, alongside a funding simplification plan, setting out the accountability mechanisms for MCAs, the Greater London Authority and other institutions that have agreed a devolution deal. It will set out how they are scrutinised and held to account by

the UK Government, local politicians and business leaders and above all by the residents and voters of their area. This work will be supported by planned improvements to the broader local government accountability framework including the establishment of the office for local government.

The Government will step ahead in extending devolution in England further. We will continue to work with local government in England to roll out further mayoral combined authorities, combined county authorities, and county deals. Discussions with places to identify potential candidates for the next set of new devolution deals will start in early 2023. The Government are particularly interested in exploring opportunities for devolution deals that will empower local leaders and communities where places want a directly elected leader, in line with the devolution framework published in the levelling-up White Paper.

The above demonstrates strong progress towards achieving the 2030 local leadership mission, which is essential to levelling up. In these areas across England, more of the decisions which matter to people—on transport, housing, and skills—will be taken by locally elected, democratically accountable leaders rooted in their place and empowered to level up.

[HCWS424]

Petition

Thursday 8 December 2022

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

Cost of living

The petition of residents of the constituency of Cynon Valley,

Declares that the economic hardship created by the cost-of-living crisis is incredibly concerning.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to hold consultations, ahead of the autumn budget, on fairer funding for Wales, inflation-proofed increases in pay, pensions and social security, controls on prices in essential household goods, increased taxation of wealth, increased emergency payments to households funded by a windfall tax, and a programme of mass home insulation.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Beth Winter, Official Report, 12 October 2022; Vol. 720, c. 222.]

[P002773]

Observations from The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glenn):

The Government thanks the hon. Member for Cynon Valley, Beth Winter MP, for submitting the petition alongside the corresponding online petition.

The Government understand that people are worried about the cost of living challenges ahead. That is why decisive action has been taken to support households across the UK through cost of living challenges ahead, whilst remaining fiscally responsible. On the 17 November, the Government announced further support for next year designed to target the most vulnerable households. This cost of living support is worth £26 billion in 2023-24, in addition to benefits uprating, which is worth £11 billion to working age households and people with disabilities.

Her constituents have called for inflation-proofed increases in pay, pensions and social security.

In the autumn statement the Government committed to protecting the most vulnerable in society, many of whom face the biggest challenge making their incomes stretch, by increasing benefits in line with inflation. This means that they will rise by September consumer prices index (CPI) inflation, 10.1%. More than 10 million working age families will see their benefit payments rise from April 2023. From April 2023, the Government will also increase the benefit cap levels in line with inflation.

As announced in the autumn statement nearly 12 million pensioners in Great Britain will benefit from a 10.1% increase to their state pension in April 2023, in line with the triple lock. The Government will also protect 1.4 million of the poorest pensioner households from inflation by increasing pension credit by 10.1%, rather than in line with average earnings growth.

The Government remain committed to ending low pay. From 1 April 2023, the national living wage (NLW) will increase by 9.7% to £10.42 an hour for workers aged 23 and over, the largest ever cash increase for the NLW. This represents an increase of over £1,600 to the annual earnings of a full-time worker on the NLW and is expected to benefit 110,000 workers in Wales. This is in addition to the previously announced reversal of the Health and Social Care Levy which will have saved the average worker £310 in 2023-24.

Young people and apprentices on the national minimum wage (NMW) rates will also see a boost to their wages. Rates will be increased for people aged 21-22 by 10.9% to £10.18 an hour, for those aged 18-20 by 9.7% to £7.49 an hour, for 16-17 year olds by 9.7% to £5.28 an hour, and for apprentices by 9.7% to £5.28 an hour.

Her constituents have called for increased emergency payments to households funded by a windfall tax. The actions taken by the Government in the autumn statement mean that over 8 million of the most vulnerable households across the UK will continue to be supported through next winter via additional cost of living payments. The Government will provide households on means-tested benefits with an additional cost of living payment of £900 in 2023-24. In the same year, pensioner households will receive an additional £300 cost of living payment, and individuals on disability benefits will receive an additional £150 disability cost of living payment. And the Government are continuing to provide support to all households through the energy price guarantee, which will save the average UK household £500 in 2023-24.

This support for 2023-24 is in addition to the generous support already in place to support households this winter. In addition to the energy price guarantee, the Government have announced £37 billion of support for the cost of living in 2022-23. As part of this financial year's cost of living support millions of the most vulnerable households will receive £1200 of support this year through the £400 EBSS, and one-off £650 cost of living payment for those on means-tested benefits, with additional support for pensioners and those claiming disability benefits.

At autumn statement, the Chancellor confirmed that, from 1 January 2023, the rate of the energy profits levy (EPL) will increase by 10 percentage points to 35%, and confirmed it will remain in place until the end of March 2028. With these changes, the EPL is expected to raise over £7 billion in 2022-23. These changes have been made to ensure oil and gas companies benefitting from sharp increases in prices continue to provide the nation with a fair return in exchange for use of our vital natural resources, while enabling the government to balance the books.

Her constituents have called for fairer funding for Wales as part of the autumn statement. As a result of UK Government tax and spending decisions confirmed at the autumn statement, devolved Administration funding is increasing by around £3.4 billion over 2023-24 and 24-25. This includes around £1.2 billion for the Welsh Government.

Her constituents have called for controls on prices in essential household goods. CPI inflation in October reached 11.1%, increasing from September's rate of 10.1%, the highest rate since 1981. The energy price guarantee (EPG) directly reduces CPI inflation. The ONS estimate that October inflation would have been 13.8% without the EPG. Similarly, the OBR in their

November economic and fiscal outlook estimate that inflation would have been around 2ppts higher without the EPG.

Her constituents have called for increased taxation of wealth. The UK system is designed to ensure among other things that the richest in our society pay their fair share on their wealth and assets, with the tax system taxing wealth across many different economic activities, including acquisition, holding, transfer and disposal of assets and income derived from assets. These tax levers generate substantial revenue, including inheritance tax revenues of £6.7 billion, capital gains tax revenues of £15.9 billion and property transaction taxes of £17.1 billion (OBR's November economic and fiscal outlook).

The 2020 Wealth Tax Commission's (WTC) report, an independent report published by a non-governmental organisation, found that, if considering inheritance tax, capital gains tax, stamp duty and stamp duty land tax, the UK is among the top of the G7 countries for wealth taxes as a percentage of total wealth.

Her constituents have called for a programme of mass home insulation. At the growth plan, we announced the expansion of the energy company obligation by £1 billion over the next three years from April 2023. From then, all households in council tax bands A-E in Wales in poorly insulated homes will be eligible for Government funded energy efficiency measures by contacting energy suppliers. Households which receive this support will save an average of £320.

On top of this, at the autumn statement 2022, the Chancellor announced a new long-term ambition to reduce the UK's final energy consumption from buildings and industry by 15% by 2030 against 2021 levels.

To lead this national effort, a new energy efficiency taskforce will be established. £6 billion of new Government funding will be made available from 2025 to 2028, in addition to £6.6 billion allocated this Parliament. This provides long-term funding certainty, supporting the growth of the supply chain and ensuring we can scale up our delivery over time.

Thank you for taking the trouble to make us aware of these concerns.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 8 December 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	493	CABINET OFFICE—continued	
Civil Service: Apprenticeships	503	Infected Blood: Support.....	498
Civil Service: Industrial Relations	501	National Infrastructure: Cost.....	494
Civil Service: Recruitment.....	498	Public Procurement.....	502
Government Estate: Running Costs	499	Public Spending: Value for Money.....	501
Government Hubs	500	Topical Questions	504
Government Information Campaigns: Local		Veterans: Support	495
Media	497	Winter Preparedness	493
GREAT Britain and Northern Ireland Campaign .	500		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 8 December 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	21WS	LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND	
Telecoms Diversification: International		COMMUNITIES	22WS
Co-operation.....	21WS	Devolution: England.....	22WS

PETITION

Thursday 8 December 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	1P
Cost of living	1P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Thursday 15 December 2022**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 8 December 2022

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 493] [see index inside back page]
Minister for the Cabinet Office

Seasonal Worker Visas: Sponsorship Certificates [Col. 513]
Answer to urgent question—(Robert Jenrick)

Called-in Planning Decision: West Cumbria [Col. 521]
Statement—(Michael Gove)

Business of the House [Col. 524]
Statement—(Penny Mordaunt)

Called-in Planning Decision: West Cumbria [Col. 542]
Statement—(Michael Gove)

Backbench Business
Cancer Services [Col. 553]
Motion—(Steve Brine)—agreed to
BBC Local Radio [Col. 573]
Motion—(Sir Mike Penning)—agreed to

E-scooters: Antisocial Use [Col. 611]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
International Human Rights Day [Col. 191WH]
General Debate

Written Statements [Col. 21WS]

Petition [Col. 1P]
Observations
