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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 15 December 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we start our business, I wish to invite the House to commemorate a tragic and sombre event. On 17 December 1942—80 years ago, on Saturday—the then Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, read to the House a declaration issued by the wartime allies condemning the treatment of Jewish people by the Nazis in occupied Europe. The declaration followed a diplomatic note sent to the allied powers a week earlier, by the Polish Foreign Minister in exile—the first official report that the holocaust was under way. The evil acts described in the declaration were, and remain, difficult to comprehend. It said:

“From all the occupied countries Jews are being transported, in conditions of appalling horror and brutality, to Eastern Europe...None of those taken away are ever heard of again. The able-bodied are slowly worked to death in labour camps. The infirm are left to die of exposure and starvation, or are deliberately massacred in mass executions.”

After the Foreign Secretary read the declaration and was questioned on it, the Member for Islington South, William Cluse, asked:

“Is it possible, in your judgement, Mr. Speaker, for Members of the House to rise in their places and stand in silence in support of this protest against disgusting barbarism?”

Speaker FitzRoy replied:

“That should be a spontaneous act by the House as a whole.”

Hansard records that

“Members of the House then stood in silence.”—[*Official Report*, 17 December 1942; Vol. 385, c. 2083-2087.]

A journalist covering the event said:

“I have never seen anything like this silence which was like the frown of the conscience of mankind.”

Today, we are honoured to be joined in the Gallery by seven survivors of the holocaust, representatives of Britain's Jewish community and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. As an exception, and because this is such a poignant moment, I have agreed that the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit and our House of Commons photographer can capture images of them here today.

To remember that important moment, and as a tribute to all those who suffered at the hands of the Nazis, I now invite the House to join me for a minute of silent reflection.

The House observed a one-minute silence.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trade Barriers: Food and Farming

1. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What progress her Department has made on tackling trade barriers for British food and farming businesses. [902792]

8. **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What progress her Department has made on tackling trade barriers for British food and farming businesses. [902804]

15. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What progress her Department has made on tackling trade barriers for British food and farming businesses. [902815]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Andrew Bowie): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing the House to take a moment this morning to show our resolve, and the country's resolve, never to forget the horrors and barbarism committed on our continent within living memory. We will always remember the holocaust, and man's inhumanity to man, and we resolve to work to ensure that the suffering of so many is never forgotten and never repeated.

In the past two years we have resolved nearly 400 trade barriers, from opening markets for UK pork in Mexico and Chile to UK poultry in Japan. The recent deals with Australia and New Zealand also provide various mechanisms to identify and address trade barriers. This year the UK achieved the first export of British lamb to the USA in more than 20 years, a market estimated by industry to be worth £37 million over the first five years.

David Duguid: May I take this opportunity to welcome my hon. Friend to his post, and to associate myself with his remarks regarding today's commemoration of the holocaust?

My hon. Friend, as a fellow Aberdeenshire Member of Parliament, will be aware, as should everyone, of the high quality of food and drink that Scotland has to offer the world. He will also be aware of the concerns raised by seed potato growers in Aberdeenshire and elsewhere across Scotland about the European Union's intransigence in not allowing the absolute same standard of seed potatoes that had been available to meet the vast demand for them across the European continent. What is the Department for International Trade doing either to resolve that issue or, indeed, to find new markets for that wonderful product?

Andrew Bowie: I thank my hon. Friend, and constituency neighbour but one, for all that he does to champion farmers in Aberdeenshire, and indeed across Scotland, as he did when he was a Scotland Office Minister. It might interest him to know that UK exports of seed potatoes to non-EU markets increased by 25% between 2018 and 2021, and last year nearly 90% of all UK seed potato exports were to non-EU countries, supported by

recent trade agreements with Egypt and Morocco. The DIT Scotland team, based in Edinburgh, as he knows well, works closely with the Scottish Government and their agencies to ensure that Scottish companies are supported to pursue opportunities for their products in new markets.

Wendy Morton: The number of food and farming businesses in my constituency is not high, but none the less they are really important. They include businesses such as Backyard Brewhouse, a craft brewery. British farming is renowned for its high-quality produce, so what is my hon. Friend's Department doing to take advantage of this and do all it can to promote our exceptional British produce?

Andrew Bowie: If my right hon. Friend were to invite me, I would be delighted to visit the Backyard Brewhouse in Brownhills. British food and drink are among the best in the world, renowned for their quality and provenance. DIT is delivering an incredibly successful programme of activity for our exports, matching our producers with international buyers. We are placing eight new dedicated agrifood attachés in growth markets around the world.

Selaine Saxby: What more is my hon. Friend hoping to deliver to ensure that our great British produce carries "Brand Britain," through national and regional UK geographical indicators to an international stage in existing and future free trade arrangements?

Andrew Bowie: I thank my hon. Friend for what she does for the food producers of North Devon. We have fantastic British produce, with protected geographical indications, such as Welsh lamb, Scotch whisky and Stilton, which are promoted and recognised around the globe through the GREAT Britain & Northern Ireland campaign, and at home through our "Made in the UK, Sold to the World" marketing strategy. This supports small and medium-sized enterprises to understand and access the benefits of FTAs and wider export opportunities and future success stories from all parts of the UK. I would be delighted to meet her to discuss what more we can do to support exports from North Devon and, indeed, the rest of the UK.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the International Trade Committee.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Tapadh leibh, Mr Speaker. As we have heard, trade barriers are a problem for seed potato growers, and yesterday the International Trade Committee heard that the biggest change that a Government could introduce to get rid of these and help the UK economy would be to rejoin the customs union and single market. How much do the Government care about the UK economy?

Andrew Bowie: I thank my hon. Friend—the hon. Member for that question. This Government care passionately about the UK economy. It might interest the hon. Member to know that the EU remains a vital trading partner for the UK. Contrary to the claim that trade with the EU has collapsed, Office for National Statistics figures show that total trade in goods and services between the UK and the EU was worth £652.6 billion in the year to June. That is up by 18%.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): British farmers could lose out on up to £148 million-worth of growth owing to the New Zealand trade deal, according to a report by the International Trade Committee. A report by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee said that British farmers could lose out on up to £278 million-worth of growth owing to the Australia trade deal. What is the Minister going to do to address those huge potential losses?

Andrew Bowie: As the hon. Member is aware, in our negotiations with New Zealand and Australia we have ensured that there are huge protections for British food and farming, including a long period of transition to allow the market to adapt. We are committed to promoting and driving up exports of British produce overseas, as well as to ensuring that the great British produce we deliver at home is protected.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): If you want to enter into the Christmas spirit, Mr Speaker, I would recommend a dram of Dalmore, Glenmorangie, Balblair, Clynelish or Old Pulteney. It is a widely recognised fact that the highland single malts are the best whiskies in the world. Notwithstanding the fact that the Minister is an Aberdeenshire man, will he make sure that sales of those whiskies are pushed very strongly?

Andrew Bowie: I would be very pleased to visit the hon. Gentleman's constituency and try all those fine whiskies. I had a meeting with the Scotch Whisky Association just last week. It is very excited about the current trajectory of Scotch whisky sales overseas, and very, very excited about what we are doing in India to reduce tariffs on Scotch whisky so that we can further promote that fantastic Scottish export around the world.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): According to the Centre for Business Prosperity, more than 40% of products such as shellfish and seed potatoes are no longer exported to European markets, for want of a veterinary agreement with the EU—yet the Government do nothing. I know that exports in ex-Prime Ministers' speeches have increased recently, thanks to the efforts of Ministers, but why will they not act now to negotiate a veterinary agreement, which would be transformational for British farmers, thousands of British businesses and the British food industry in particular?

Andrew Bowie: This negativity about our export position with the European Union is precisely why so many people are turned off from the Labour party and have been for such a long time. Contrary to what the hon. Gentleman said, trade with the EU is actually up by 18%. The veterinary agreement would involve dynamic alignment with the EU, which I believe the Labour party is opposed to; the hon. Gentleman might want to correct the record. In terms of overall relations with the EU, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade Policy is engaging every single day with our European partners to see what we can do to drive down trade barriers further, so that we can promote British exports on the continent. Notwithstanding that, we are looking for new export opportunities in emerging markets around the world.

Mr Speaker: We come to the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): The New Zealand trade deal will mean an expected £150 million hit to agriculture and food-related industries each year. An impact analysis shows that the Australia trade deal will mean an expected £94 million hit to farming and a £225 million hit to food processing each year. On top of that, UK food and drink exports to the EU have already fallen, despite what the Minister says, by more than £1.3 billion, because of the Brexit deal that this Government signed. Given that mounting charge sheet, how can farmers and food producers in this country ever again trust a word that the Tories say?

Andrew Bowie: We will take no lectures from the SNP on supporting Scottish farmers and food producers. It is not the UK Government who are accused of operating in an information void due to the lack of information and slow progress of Scotland's post-Brexit agricultural Bill. It is not the UK Government who were criticised by the National Farmers Union of Scotland for not voting for the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill a couple of weeks ago. This Government are committed to supporting Scottish, and indeed British, food producers and exporters, not creating division and stoking negativity, which is all the SNP ever brings to the table.

Richard Thomson: I think Aberdeenshire farmers will take that with a large pinch of salt. The Secretary of State says that she is a huge believer in British farming and the role it plays in our national life. She wrote an article a few years ago on fears about the impact of opening up our markets on domestic producers such as farmers. In the light of all that, how long does the Minister seriously think it will be before he and his colleagues trigger the mechanisms to bring an end to these disastrous trade deals with Australia and New Zealand?

Andrew Bowie: The trade deals with New Zealand and Australia are great deals for British exporters and this country. As I said, unlike the Scottish National party, we are committed to championing Scottish and British exports and food and drink around the world, not creating negativity. It is time that the hon. Gentleman championed great British exporters—great Aberdeenshire exporters—instead of coming here with all that scare-mongering and negativity, as he does weekly.

Financial Services

2. **Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to increase trade opportunities for the financial services sector. [902795]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Nigel Huddleston): The Department for International Trade is absolutely committed to increasing trade opportunities for the UK financial services sector. Through our network of in-market sector specialists located in Europe, India, Singapore and beyond, the Department is identifying and removing market access barriers and supporting companies to export their services to the world. Working with organisations such as the City of London, the Investment Association and others, we are promoting

the UK's world-class financial services overseas. We are also championing financial services through our free trade agreements.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Has the Minister a programme of support for fintech and start-ups in that sector?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that sector, which is hugely important to the UK economy and a major export generator. Our export strategy, which we published last year, outlines the Government support available for British exporters, including the financial services sector. The strategy updates the Department's support for services firms and helps to give businesses and financial tech innovators the flexibility and resilience to thrive and trade globally. As well as providing large amounts of online support and information, including webinars, the Department provides tailored support services—for example, through trade advisers—from which firms of all sizes can benefit.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): If we are to increase trade opportunities for the financial services sector, does the Minister agree that we must deal with the prevalence of money laundering for Russian kleptocrats, which has earned London the nickname “Londongrad”? Does he believe that we need to ensure that we can tackle such illegal activity in the City?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point and, of course, that is exactly what we are doing. The Government are very aware of the issues and, with the support of the whole House, have taken robust action on sanctions against Russia, and will continue to do so.

Japan

3. **Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to increase trade with Japan. [902796]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): In 2021, the Conservative Government concluded the UK-Japan comprehensive economic partnership agreement—the first major trade deal that the UK struck as an independent trading nation. That agreement provides significant opportunities for British business in Japan and goes further than the previous EU deal. It also strengthens our case for accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. The UK Government are also working hard to reduce barriers to trade in Japan—for example, last year, we secured market access for UK poultry, which is worth £65 million over five years.

Charlotte Nichols: Last month, I visited Japan with the British Council where I saw its fantastic work to promote UK arts and culture and to strengthen our trading relationship with a key ally in the Indo-Pacific region. Does the Minister agree that the British Council is a soft power powerhouse, and can he tell me what work the Department does with it to boost trade around the world?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. We work closely with all aspects of UK hard and soft power abroad and we frequently work with the British

Council, particularly on our education exports, which are a huge sector and a huge opportunity for this country. We engage regularly with the British Council to ensure that the DIT is at the forefront of our educational offer in particular and that the ties of friendship promoted by the British Council feed through into our commercial relationship. There is no better example of that than our excellent recent deal with Japan.

Inward Investment

4. **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the contribution of inward investment to the Government's growth agenda. [902798]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Kemi Badenoch): In the last financial year, DIT supported foreign direct investments generating over £7 billion-worth of economic impact to the UK economy and creating nearly 73,000 new jobs, of which 34,000 were outside London and the south-east, contributing to our levelling-up agenda. In 2021-22, we supported 91 inward investment projects aligned with the 10-point plan into the UK, which delivered £13 billion of green investment. In October, as part of the Green Trade & Investment Expo, I visited the Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult in Blyth—an excellent example of our British low-carbon sectors.

Tom Randall: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. I am sure she will agree that the benefits of investment need to be seen throughout the United Kingdom. In that context, will she tell me what her Department is doing to support the levelling-up agenda and, in particular, to locate staff in the regions and nations?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. DIT intends to grow over 550 roles outside London by 2025. Our second major location will be the Darlington economic campus, alongside three new trade and investment offices in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. I would also like my hon. Friend, as an east midlands MP, to know that I visited businesses in the east midlands just last month, and I am supported by DIT staff based all around the region, who are doing a fantastic job on trade advisory.

Trade Barriers

5. **Mark Garnier** (Wyre Forest) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce barriers to global trade for British businesses. [902799]

10. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce barriers to global trade for British businesses. [902808]

12. **Sir Robert Syms** (Poole) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce barriers to global trade for British businesses. [902811]

16. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce barriers to global trade for British businesses. [902816]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): In the past financial year, we have resolved 192 individual trade barriers in over 70 countries. Forty-five of these alone are estimated to be worth around £5 billion to British businesses over the next five years. The Department is working tirelessly to remove the most prominent bilateral trade barriers—work that has the potential to deliver £20 billion-worth of opportunities for businesses across the entire UK.

Mark Garnier: My right hon. Friend's Department has done sterling work in achieving free trade deals with 60 or so countries around the world. However, many other countries are incredibly enthusiastic to do free trade agreements, and none more so than the Kingdom of Thailand. As the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Thailand, may I urge my right hon. Friend to do all he can to move talks beyond where they are now to secure a free trade agreement with the Kingdom of Thailand, which is keen to continue building on our great trading relationship?

Greg Hands: First, I commend my hon. Friend for his work as a former Minister at the Department. He will be delighted to know that we have increased the number of countries with which we have a free trade agreement to 71, in addition to the European Union itself. I also commend him for his work as trade envoy to Thailand and Brunei. He will know that we had our first ministerial joint economic and trade committee with Thailand in June, and we have agreed to deepen our trade relationship by developing an enhanced trade partnership. There are no current plans in place for an FTA, but this enhanced trade partnership could be the first step in laying the foundations for a potential FTA in the future.

Scott Benton: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Gulf region offers huge opportunities for British businesses and their export potential? Is he able to update the House on his Department's work in supporting trade to the region?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is always looking for opportunities for Blackpool businesses and his constituency. He is right: the UK is negotiating an ambitious trade deal with the Gulf Co-operation Council, and an FTA is expected to boost trade between our economies by at least 16%. We also engage bilaterally with GCC countries. For example, a key recent success was being able to get Holland & Barrett vitamin and food supplements into Qatar, which was worth an estimated £250,000.

Sir Robert Syms: I commend the Minister of State on all the hard work he is doing—I am an avid follower of his Twitter feed, and it is interesting to find out which country he is in on any individual day. We do a lot of good exports of cars and so on, but one area we need to grow is invisibles—financial and other services. When we do trade agreements, are we putting enough effort into ensuring that our service sector can take full advantage of them?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head—quite apart from the fact that he follows me so closely on Twitter. I would perhaps commend that more widely, and I hope my constituents get a look in from time to time. I thank my hon. Friend for that.

My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head when he talks about the importance of the services sector. Services are 80% of our economy. We are the world's second largest services exporter. I used to sit at the EU Foreign Affairs Council on trade, and it was often difficult to get the EU to focus as well as it might have done on services possibilities. We now have an independent trade policy, which allows us to give services the focus that UK service companies and service providers deserve, and financial services are very much at the heart of that. We always make sure that our services offer is right at the forefront of our FTA talks and other bilateral trade talks.

Mark Pawsey: GE Power Conversion, which is based in my Rugby constituency, has strong relationships with shipowners and designers who are increasingly choosing to have ships built in China. They see opportunities for offering their expertise in electrification of large vessels, as the maritime sector decarbonises. Will the Minister provide some clarity on the Government's approach to trade with businesses in China and give some indication of the steps that UK exporters need to take to compete with international competitors in that market and to gain full advantage of the opportunities that are available there?

Greg Hands: In successive Government positions, I have always noticed how diverse the businesses are in my hon. Friend's Rugby constituency, right at the very industrial heartland of this country. He is right to raise the matter of trade with China. The UK engages with China. We remain open to Chinese trade and investment, while ensuring that robust protections are in place to safeguard the UK's prosperity, values and security. He raises the issue of GE. We are engaging DIT officials based both in the UK and in China and already engaging with GE.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am not sure that I follow the Minister's Twitter feed so avidly as other Members—*[Interruption.]* Easy! I suspect that he might have retweeted something that was published by the Conservative party earlier this year, which said:

"We've secured new free trade deals with over 70 countries since 2016. That's over £800bn worth of new free trade."

But that is not true, is it? Actually, the UK Statistics Authority has told the Conservative party to stop publishing such fibs. Did the Minister retweet that, and, if he did so, will he apologise?

Greg Hands: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has raised that. He has pointed out the fact that we have done trade deals with 71 countries plus the EU, and that that is about £800 billion-worth of trade with those countries. He may have done this inadvertently, but he draws attention to the fact that the Labour party has failed pretty much to support any of the deals that he is quoting. It abstained on the Japan deal. It abstained on the Australia and New Zealand deals. I bet the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) did not mention that to the Australian Trade Minister when he saw him last week. According to his Twitter feed, the party split three ways on Canada. It has failed to support any of these trade deals over the years. It is a bit rich of the party to raise it now.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Of course the Minister will bluster and try to divert as much as he possibly can from the substance, as he normally does. Sir Christopher Chote from the UK Statistics Authority wrote to me, saying:

"It is misleading to describe the £800 billion figure as a measure of 'new global trade' resulting from the recent deals."

That is black and white. Will the Minister now apologise on behalf of his party and Ministers for sharing that tweet and misinformation and set the record straight? Yes, or no?

Greg Hands: May I start by correcting the hon. Gentleman: it is actually Sir Robert Chote who is the chairman of the UK Statistics Authority? I do not resile from the fact that we have concluded free trade agreements with 71 countries plus the EU. I notice, of course, that he voted against the EU deal, preferring no deal. I checked before coming here exactly what the SNP's record was on these deals. I will read it out. On Japan, it was against—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Bowie, you got carried away yesterday. I know that it is Christmas; do not let me give you that present.

Greg Hands: I checked the record. On Japan, the SNP was against. On Singapore, it was against. On Canada, it was against. On South Africa, it was against. On Korea, it was against. On Ukraine, it was even absent. So I will not take any lessons from the hon. Gentleman about the 71 deals. Perhaps he might start supporting a trade deal for once, and then he can get behind British exporters.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As an active Member of Parliament for my constituency, I know that my Northern Ireland businesses are subject to trade barriers and red tape day in, day out, as we are subject to different trading guidelines from the rest of the UK. The Minister is always helpful, so will he tell us what steps will be taken to address the delay in the passage of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, to ensure that Northern Ireland can truly be a full economic partner of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Greg Hands: I strongly believe in the actual and potential capabilities of Northern Ireland as a great exporting part of the UK. Northern Ireland absolutely plays a full part in our free trade agreements. One standout feature of the Australia deal was about the ability of Northern Irish machinery exporters—a big amount of machinery goes from Northern Ireland to Australia and to New Zealand. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Northern Ireland protocol is an active area of negotiation between my colleagues at the Foreign Office and the Commission. I am sure that he and I will look forward to seeing a resolution for those barriers; we recognise that the Northern Ireland protocol is not working for the people of Northern Ireland and we look forward to seeing a resolution in due course.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Surely it is vital that the Government support British businesses, but even senior Conservatives have admitted that the

Government have failed on that front. As it is nearly Christmas, I thought we would indulge in a game of “guess who?”. Does the Minister know if the Secretary of State knows which one of her colleagues called the UK’s trade deals “one-sided”? Was it: the former Environment Secretary; the former exports Minister; or her boss, the Prime Minister?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Lady for her festive cheers and Christmas quiz. I am immensely proud, as I know the Secretary of State is, of our teams, right across the Department for International Trade, who are out negotiating. We are negotiating with more partners at the moment than any other country in the world on free trade agreements. Those negotiation rounds have been going on recently, into December, with people working incredibly hard to land the best deals for Britain. I am just looking forward to the day when perhaps the Labour party and the other Opposition parties might start supporting these deals, getting behind British business and British exporters into our excellent free trade future.

Exports

6. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase exports. [902800]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Andrew Bowie): Boosting exports is at the forefront of this Government’s agenda. I am pleased to say that UK exports were worth nearly £760 billion in the 12 months to the end of October 2022—that was an increase of £57 billion, once adjusted for inflation. Our Export Support Service has received more than 11,800 inquiries since its launch in October 2021, providing call-backs to customers and referring companies to other Department for International Trade services more effectively, to support them on their exporting journey.

Mohammad Yasin: The UK trade performance is the worst on record. Lost output is estimated at £100 billion a year. With such an appalling record, it is hardly surprising that the Government are making false claims to have secured £800 billion in new free trade deals when most post-Brexit trade deals are just roll-overs. Businesses in Bedford, big and small, are overburdened with red tape. Will the Minister explain how businesses in my constituency can improve growth and trade with the biggest trading bloc in the world?

Andrew Bowie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, but I am afraid that what he says is simply not true: the Japan deal was not a roll-over, and neither were those with Australia and New Zealand; the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership discussions we are in right now will not lead to a roll-over; and a deal with India, where my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has just returned from, will not be a roll-over. The hon. Gentleman talks about the EU, so I am afraid I am going to have to repeat what I said earlier: trade with the EU in the year up to June was up by about 18% and worth £652.6 billion. We are committed to growing our exports around the world and supporting British exporters to get out there and sell fantastic British goods and services into new markets, but we are also committed to continuing to sell into the EU and we continue to do so very effectively indeed.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Farmers in my constituency—I remind the House that I am one—have expressed concerns about ensuring that agricultural interests are adequately taken into account in the upcoming free trade agreement with Canada and the trans-pacific trade agreement that the Minister refers to. I welcome him to his place; will he please invite the Secretary of State to meet me and other colleagues representing agricultural constituencies to discuss those concerns?

Andrew Bowie: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and for bringing to my attention that it will also be a new agreement between Canada and ourselves, which I forgot to mention in my earlier answer. We are pursuing an ambitious and comprehensive free trade agreement with Canada that builds on our existing trading relationship, already worth £23 billion. We have been clear that the new agreement must work for British exporters, including those in our agriculture and food and drink industries. That includes maintaining our high animal welfare and food safety standards for farmers in Ludlow and across the UK.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): According to a recent report by the Social Market Foundation, while world goods exports were 7.9% higher by mid-2022 than they were at the end of 2019, the UK’s goods exports were 21% lower. “Could do better” would be a kind end-of-term report. Will the Minister now commit to a recommendation from the Institute of Directors to monitor and publish the impact of Government assistance from the Department’s teams—both overseas and UK-based—to assess their effectiveness and inform improvements so that all businesses get the best possible support for their exporting needs?

Andrew Bowie: This Department and, in fact, this entire Government are committed to growing our exports. We are going to export our way to growth and, in the 12 months to December 2022, trade was worth £748 billion.¹ We are rolling out our export support service, making export champions more visible and more available across all nations and regions of this United Kingdom. We are committed to working with small and medium-sized enterprises to get them into exporting and we are supporting those companies that export already. We are driving up exports from this country and our new independent trade policy—something that, if the Labour party had its way, we would not have in the first place—allows us to do just that.

Trade Policy: Food Prices

7. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the impact of her Department’s trade policies on UK food prices. [902803]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The UK’s trade policy works to increase access to good quality, good value food from around the world. For example, our recent free trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand reduce or remove tariffs on the vast majority of goods, which could help to lower prices. However, there are many factors which contribute to UK food prices and the precise impact of each is uncertain. Beyond immediate price changes, security of global food supply is essential to guarantee the availability and affordability of UK food in the long term.

1. [Official Report, 9 January 2023, Vol. 725, c. 6MC.]

Gavin Newlands: That is all well and good, but a new report from the UK in a Changing Europe think tank has said that new trade barriers as a result of Brexit have caused a 6% increase in food prices in the UK. Asked why food prices are rising, the former chief executive officer of Sainsburys, Justin King, answered “Brexit”, and this month a Bank of England policy maker went on the record to say that,

“Brexit has fuelled a surge in UK food prices”.

Does the Minister agree that staying in the EU kept food prices low and that independence and the European Union would keep prices down?

Greg Hands: I am always interested when the hon. Gentleman cites various reports, many of which I have of course read and studied closely, but I like to return to the facts. I checked beforehand, because I thought he might raise this. He is right that food price inflation is a real concern, and yesterday’s inflation data showed that food prices are still rising even though overall inflation is falling, which will cause difficulties for many countries across this country. However, the premise of his question is not quite right: in the UK, the most recent data available shows that food and non-alcoholic beverage prices rose by 16.4%, whereas in the EU27, for the same period, they rose by more—17.3%.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): In this House I have been a champion for promoting the availability of affordable, healthy and nutritious food to those from all regions of the UK and all backgrounds. Families are feeling the cost of living pressures, as evidenced by research from the British Retail Consortium, which recorded a record high 12.5% inflation in UK food prices in November. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give me that he is doing everything in his power through his trade negotiations to mitigate the effect of food price inflation on ordinary working families?

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She is right to raise, as I did just a moment ago, the importance of this issue to families up and down the country, including in Stoke-on-Trent. The Government have comprehensive measures in place to support families through this winter, including council tax discounts, and energy and further help. On food and trade policy, ensuring that we remain committed to free trade, and that we have diverse sources of supply, is essential. We must ensure that Britain remains open for food exporters to come to the UK and help to keep prices down, as well as recognising the vital job done by our own domestic agriculture and food production sectors.

UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement

9. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What progress she has made on the commencement of the UK-Australia free trade agreement. [902805]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Nigel Huddleston): The UK-Australia free trade agreement is expected to unlock more than £10 billion pounds of additional bilateral trade. We are working at pace to implement it, so that businesses can benefit from it as soon as possible. The Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill is making its passage through Parliament. It passed Report and Third Reading on Monday, and

was introduced into the House of Lords on 13 December. The Government and the devolved Administrations are working together to progress the required statutory instruments to implement the agreement. We expect the free trade agreement to come into force in spring 2023.

Gerald Jones: The UK-Australia trade deal has been beset by difficulties and major delays to its passage through this House, and even the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), no longer has to put a “positive gloss” on what was agreed. I, too, have serious concerns about the impact of the deal on Welsh and UK farmers. Will the Minister explain the delay behind the scenes? What discussions have been had with business managers about the delays to the Bill’s passage through the House, and will he give us some clarity?

Nigel Huddleston: I would like to correct the hon. Gentleman. We are progressing at pace, and we are having conversations with the devolved Administrations—indeed, I had conversations with Ministers from Wales and Scotland recently. Overall, enthusiasm for the deals is considerable right across the UK. Let us not forget that they will boost the economy, to the tune of £2.3 billion for the Australia deal and more than £800 million for the New Zealand deal. That will bring huge benefits right across the country, and all nations of the UK will benefit from a 53% and 59% boost to bilateral trade through the Australia and New Zealand deals respectively. We all want to move at pace, and we are having constructive conversations with the devolved Administrations.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The UK-Australia free trade agreement is, so the House has been told, a stepping stone to accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. As we saw on Monday, it is not clear that Ministers have learned the lessons from the rushed negotiations on the Australia deal, and there is real concern that the existing rules of the CPTPP will be largely forced on Britain. I am sure the Minister will not want Britain to be a rule taker, so can he assure us that we will not be subject to any new secret courts through the investor-state dispute settlement?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that discussions with the CPTPP are ongoing, and we are confident that we will strike a mutually beneficial and extremely good deal. I advise him to watch this space.

Trade Remedies Authority: Aluminium

11. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of measures taken by the Trade Remedies Authority to help protect the aluminium extrusion industry. [902810]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Nigel Huddleston): The UK trade remedies framework has been established to ensure that the Trade Remedies Authority has full independence when investigating unfair trading practices. As is the case with aluminium extrusions, the TRA provides thorough, objective and expert advice to Ministers based on evidence collected during the

course of an investigation. The reasons for the TRA's recommendation will be published alongside the ministerial decision to accept or reject the recommendation in its entirety.

Liz Twist: Over the past year I have been asking about the impact of the Trade Remedies Authority's determination on this issue, and I now hear that the final determination is due to be published in days. There are real concerns that the proposed tariffs will do nothing to support our domestic aluminium extrusion producers, such as Hydro in my constituency, and producers in the constituencies of other MPs. What support will the Minister give to our domestic aluminium extrusion producers, should their fears about the dumping of aluminium extrusion prove correct? Will he meet me to discuss the situation?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Lady is correct. She will be aware that the recommendations are due to be published soon; she will understand that I cannot pre-empt today the conclusions of the investigation. As I have said, the TRA is independent and it reviews evidence very carefully indeed. On the hon. Lady's other question, I would be delighted to meet her to discuss the matter further.

Topical Questions

T1. [902817] **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Kemi Badenoch): Yesterday, I returned from Delhi after holding trade talks with my counterpart, Minister Piyush Goyal, during the sixth round of the UK-India free trade agreement negotiations. We agreed that an ambitious, balanced deal that works for both our countries can be reached and should be reached at the earliest opportunity. Meeting key UK and Indian businesses at the UK India Business Council and Confederation of Indian Industry trade conference made clearer still the opportunities that the FTA would create for businesses and future generations in both our countries. I look forward to updating the House at the end of our round.

Gareth Bacon: In 2019, our trade with CPTPP countries reached £110.7 billion, so does my right hon. Friend share my optimism that joining the bloc will increase our national prosperity? Does she agree that free trade and helping businesses such as those in Orpington to export are how we will create genuine, long-term, sustainable wealth?

Kemi Badenoch: I share my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for CPTPP. Joining CPTPP will offer new opportunities for businesses in Orpington and across the UK. The potential increase to UK GDP is projected to be £1.8 billion. More than 99% of British goods exported will be eligible for tariff-free trade, including in new markets such as Malaysia. Customs procedures will become clearer and more efficient. Firms working in services will have increased market access, greater transparency and predictability.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): May I wish all hon. Members a very happy Christmas? In the spirit of Christmas cheer, I will offer the Minister for Trade

Policy some help after his struggles in the Christmas quiz from my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) earlier: it was, of course, the Prime Minister who said that the Australia deal was "one-sided".

There is more:

"The first step is to recognise that the Australia trade deal is not actually a very good deal for the UK".—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]

Those are not my words, but the words of the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). Quite simply, why should anyone have confidence in the Conservatives' trade policy when they do not have confidence in it themselves?

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid the right hon. Gentleman is talking nonsense. The Australia free trade agreement is a great deal. It will boost the household wages going into our pockets by an estimated £900 million. It will grow the UK economy to be an estimated £2.3 billion bigger in 2035. It will see the removal of all tariffs on UK exports, which will make it easier to sell all UK goods, from cars to chocolate and Scotch whisky. There will be lower prices at home. I had a meeting with the Australian Trade Minister, and we had a very good conversation. I think it is a shame that the shadow Secretary of State did the same and is now coming here to say negative things about the deal.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: If the Secretary of State thinks that those views are nonsense, I suggest she takes them up with the Prime Minister and the former Secretary of State. It was their judgment that I put to her, not my words.

On trade, the reality is that the Conservatives are delivering either bad deals or no deals at all. That is what happens when we have a Government who are high on rhetoric and devoid of strategy, with workers and businesses paying the price. Let me ask a simple question. If the Government will not hit their target of 80% of our trade being under FTAs by the end of the year—and they won't—when will they hit it?

Kemi Badenoch: As Secretary of State, I have been very clear that what is important is the substance of trade deals, not the timing. It is about the deals, not the day. I am negotiating quality trade deals for the UK that will last for generations to come. We are thinking about the future, not trying to re-fight the Brexit debate.

T2. [902819] **Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): Medtrade in my constituency has not only been supplying battlefield bleed control packs to Ukraine, but recently received approval for a new treatment for postpartum haemorrhage, which affects 14 million women globally and causes 80,000 deaths a year. Will the Secretary of State join me in meeting Medtrade in Crewe to understand how we can better help such innovative life sciences companies in our constituencies?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend and Medtrade for their support in sending supplies to Ukraine. My Department is committed to supporting innovative life sciences companies; he will have seen the Board of Trade's recent report on life sciences. DIT North West has worked with Medtrade for several years to grow its

exports and will continue to support its export journey. I am sure that the exports Minister—the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie)—will be happy to meet him to further discuss what we can do.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State recently announced signing a memorandum of understanding with the US state of South Carolina focusing on life sciences and automotive—areas that are very important to the north-east. Could she set out exactly how businesses in Newcastle can benefit from that memorandum of understanding and whether it is supposed to compensate for the lack of any trade agreement with the United States?

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): It was me who signed the deal with South Carolina last Wednesday, and the hon. Lady can see the deal for herself on gov.uk. We have done deals with Indiana and North Carolina. Offshore wind is important for her area of the country, and North Carolina brought in an offshore wind delegation to see its governor just a couple of months after the signing of the deal, so these deals are leading to tangible opportunities.

T4. [902822] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): As was rightly pointed out earlier, food price inflation is a huge problem for British consumers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should look at negotiating trade in tomatoes from Morocco, which has the potential of saving about £180 million a year? That would be a big improvement for the British consumer, as every little helps each individual.

Greg Hands: I am delighted that my hon. Friend raised Morocco, because although they were defeated in the end, their performance was marvellous in the World cup last night. We have a new agreement with Morocco. We are keen to diversify our sources of food supply. We had the inaugural UK-Morocco trade and investment sub-committee meeting in July, and I look forward to doing more with Morocco, as I am sure my hon. Friend does.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Will the Government accept that if the anti-dumping duties placed on Chinese imported aluminium extrusions are too low, the result could be the loss of thousands upon thousands of British jobs?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Nigel Huddleston): As I said a few moments ago, a report will be coming out very soon, and we will be able to comment further at that point. We have had many representations, and the Trade Remedies Authority has worked very carefully on these issues.

T5. [902823] **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): The UK has a highly developed renewable energy sector, which includes many businesses based in my constituency. Across the world there are many countries eager to remove fossil fuel generation. Can the Minister give an assurance that the Department will do more to encourage our renewable energy sector to get more into the export market?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Andrew Bowie): I can indeed. At the green trade and investment expo in Gateshead last month, I saw many companies from around the UK that are engaged in exporting renewable energies technology around the world. Indeed, the UK is home to world-leading companies in the design and development of renewable energy, and the Department for International Trade has already supported over £5 billion of exports across the energy and infrastructure sectors in the past.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Centre for Business Prosperity at Aston University has estimated that 42% of British exports have disappeared from European shelves since Brexit. Is the Secretary of State proud of her party's 12-year record in charge of export policy?

Andrew Bowie: The hon. Member obviously was not listening to what I said earlier. Trade with the EU is actually up 18%. Instead of coming here and talking down Scottish and British businesses that are exporting to the continent and around the world, he should join us—he should be here championing Scotch whisky exports, which are up; he should be here championing Scotch beef exports, which are up; and he should be here championing the great Scottish financial services exports, which are up around the world and transforming lives for the better.

T6. [902825] **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend update the House on trade envoy positions? Following my recent Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office report on the Commonwealth, which I am sure he has read, will there be a specific trade envoy position for the Commonwealth family of nations?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is a tireless advocate of ties with the Commonwealth. We already have a trade envoy appointed to 15 Commonwealth nations. We have no plans to add a dedicated Commonwealth trade envoy to the programme. We have trade agreements with 33 Commonwealth members, with a further 16 benefiting from reduced tariffs, and six of the 11 trans-Pacific partnership countries are Commonwealth members.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Northern Ireland's food and drink exports are worth some £5.4 billion, and we export 65% of the sector's manufacturing to the UK, the EU and the rest of the world. What discussions has the Minister had with the Ulster Farmers' Union, in which I declare an interest, to commit to protecting Northern Ireland's agriculture industry in any future trade deal?

Kemi Badenoch: I have not personally had any meetings with the Ulster Farmers' Union, but one of my Ministers has. I want to emphasise that our export strategy is focused on such issues. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me with more specifics, I would be very happy to take them up on his behalf.

T7. [902826] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): The road to net zero provides many local job-creation opportunities on the north East Anglian coast in technologies such as offshore wind, hydrogen and carbon capture. The

Government are backing these industries, but significant private sector investment is required. I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend outlined what her Department is doing to attract inward investment to these exciting emerging sectors.

Andrew Bowie: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his work not only as the MP for Waveney but as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the British offshore oil and gas industry. He is well apprised of what we are doing in the energy sector. DIT and the Office for Investment work directly with project leads, investors and financial institutions, and we are seeing excellent progress. For example, ScottishPower is investing £2.5 billion in its East Anglia ONE project, the first of four in the region, including a £25 million state-of-the-art operations and maintenance facility in Lowestoft. Events such as the recent green trade and investment expo in Gateshead, which I mentioned, are showcasing UK opportunities to the world in many technologies, such as carbon capture and hydrogen.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Exports such as squid from the Falklands are an enormously important part of the economies of our overseas territories and Crown dependencies. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that everything possible is being done to support the trading relationships of this important part of the British family?

Kemi Badenoch: We work closely with the Crown dependencies and overseas territories to ensure their interests are actively represented in our FTA programme and trade negotiations. DIT officials have fortnightly contact with them, and the Minister for Trade Policy has recently engaged with them and will continue to do so.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I was interested to hear the Secretary of State's update on India. Can she go into more detail on how many chapters have closed and on the big opportunities in this trading relationship?

Kemi Badenoch: Sixteen chapters have closed. I returned from India just yesterday, and I am still a bit jetlagged. We had two days of invigorating trade talks. Minister Goyal and I had face-to-face discussions on the priority areas within the FTA, including goods, services and investment. I had meetings with multiple businesses that the embassy and all our fantastic officials are supporting.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Minister for Trade Policy mentioned the North Carolina trade agreement he has just signed. Can he explain how this will help businesses in places such as West Oxfordshire to export to every corner of the United States, our largest trading partner?

Greg Hands: We have now signed three of these deals. Last week, we brought Utah a bit closer and we have agreed to start negotiations with California. As a practical example, an offshore wind delegation went to see Governor

Cooper of North Carolina just a few months after the deal. We had the first meeting of the working group on Indiana last Monday, at which we talked about increasing the opportunities for UK firms to bid into state procurement markets in the United States. As we know, the US is a very federal system and some state procurement markets offer great potential for companies across the UK, including in my hon. Friend's Oxfordshire constituency.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): We have recently signed several agreements with Indonesia, which is good news, and the follow-up is now critical. Will my right hon. Friend confirm, first, that the next round of Joint Economic and Trade Committee talks will happen here in London in the first quarter of next year? Secondly, will the new Government-to-Government framework have Indonesia as a priority? Thirdly, and perhaps most intriguingly, can we move to negotiations on an FTA as soon as possible?

Kemi Badenoch: I congratulate my hon. Friend on being a doughty champion of Indonesia and on being such a good trade envoy. He is right that we want to have a JETCO early next year. The Department is liaising closely with its counterparts in Indonesia, and I would be delighted to invite him to assist us in all our engagements to make sure we see all the good things that he wants to happen.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I start by thanking you, Mr Speaker, for leading us in the one-minute silence commemorating 80 years since this House recognised that the holocaust was taking place in Nazi-occupied Europe. It was a powerful moment for the House, and thank you, too, for the welcome you gave to the incredible holocaust survivors who are with us this morning.

Following the Minister's meeting with the French Trade Minister Olivier Becht yesterday, does he agree that there is a new mood of optimism around the Franco-British bilateral relationship, and that the planned summit in the new year provides a really good moment to think about deepening our ties of co-operation, especially on trade and energy security, and increasing people-to-people contact?

Greg Hands: I join my right hon. Friend in commending you, Mr Speaker, for the commemoration earlier today. My right hon. Friend is quite right that I had a very good meeting with Olivier Becht yesterday. It lasted a full hour, online, and we covered an enormous range of issues, including preparations for the UK-France summit coming up early next year. That will be a great opportunity for us to build on that relationship.

As the Minister responsible for exports—my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie)—said, trade with the EU is going back up. That is great news and we need to make sure that the trading relationship with France—we are the third largest investor in France and that is a really important relationship—continues to flourish. I know that my right hon. Friend, as chair of the all-party group for France, will take a keen and continuing interest in that.

Chinese Consul General: Attack on Protesters in Manchester

10.36 am

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs to update the House on the investigation into the Chinese consul general's attack on protesters in Manchester.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): As Members of the House will be aware, the Foreign Secretary laid a written ministerial statement yesterday to update the House on actions taken following the incident that occurred outside the Chinese consulate in Manchester on 16 October. I was as shocked as all Members of the House to see the disturbing social media footage of violence there that day. The right of free expression—the right to protest peacefully, the right to speak one's mind free from the fear or threat of violence—is an absolutely fundamental part of our democratic life in the UK.

In our immediate response, the Foreign Secretary summoned China's acting ambassador—the most senior Chinese diplomat who was in the UK that day—to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to demand an explanation for the incident. His Majesty's ambassador in Beijing also sought a further explanation from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Following the incident, Greater Manchester police initiated an investigation. As part of that investigation, the police requested that the FCDO approach the Chinese Government to ask them to waive immunity of the Chinese consul general and five of his staff to enable interviews to take place. We informed the Chinese embassy of that request and set yesterday as the deadline, making it clear that we expected it to take action.

Indeed, we have been clear with China from the outset that we would take firm action should the police determine that there was a need to interview officials regarding their involvement in the incident. We rightly expect the highest standard of behaviour from all foreign diplomats and consular staff in the UK regardless of their privileges and immunities.

In response to our request, the Chinese embassy, acting on instruction from Beijing, notified His Majesty's Government earlier this week that it had removed the consul general from the UK. The embassy also notified us that five other staff identified for interview from the incident by Greater Manchester police have either now left or are about to leave the UK. I wish to put on record my thanks for the professionalism shown by Greater Manchester police, particularly given the complexities of dealing with this case.

As the Foreign Secretary said yesterday, we are disappointed that these individuals will not be interviewed. It is therefore right that those identified by the police as involved in the disgraceful scenes in Manchester are no longer, or will shortly cease to be, consular staff accredited to the UK. Throughout this process, we have been clear that, in the UK, we adhere to the rule of law, follow due process and respect the operational independence of our police.

Our firm diplomacy and our actions demonstrate the seriousness with which we took this incident, and the correct outcome has now been reached. The UK will always use our diplomacy to demonstrate the importance of abiding by the rule of law, and we expect others to do the same.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker, and let me put on record how disappointed I am that the Government felt that a written ministerial statement was sufficient to update the House on this issue.

The consul general and five others brutalised a refugee on British soil, and rather than being expelled or prosecuted, they have been allowed to slip off—to flee like cowards—which makes their guilt even more evident. By giving them a week's notice, which goes far beyond the Vienna convention on consular relations, we have essentially denied Bob Chan any sense of justice. I am afraid that, at this point, the Government are being opaque, and I cannot identify any meaningful action that they have taken beyond giving the diplomats notice to flee the country, and essentially allowing the Chinese Communist party to claim now that it was simply the end of their term in Britain: they were not removed, they were not expelled, it was just time for him to leave our country.

I am not asking the Government to be tough for toughness' sake. Justice is needed to deter future action and to ensure that we stand by the refugees who come to this country for safety. I ask the Minister please to reassure refugees in our country that we will not stand for transnational repression, and that we will take action by declaring those individuals who have fled personae non gratae so that they can never return to British soil again and potentially brutalise people or undermine the values that we have in this country.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I said in my statement and as was said in our conversations with the Chinese embassy, in London and indeed at post—our ambassador's conversations with the Chinese Government in Beijing—we made it very clear that the Chinese diplomats' behaviour was completely unacceptable, but because, as I have said, we believe in the operational independence of the police, we asked for Greater Manchester police to be allowed to investigate the matter, and asked for the Chinese to co-operate fully with the police investigation. The diplomatic frameworks that exist for that very purpose were observed, and we are content with the outcome that the Chinese direction from Beijing was to bring its people home and remove them from being accredited members of the UK diplomatic corps.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank the chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), for the urgent question, and for her tireless work on this issue to date. We have heard of government by press release, but I think we now have government by urgent question. This is the third urgent question with the third Minister and the third slightly different version of events, and the impression is of dither and delay.

Of course Labour Members believe that the right of free expression, including the right to protest and to speak one's mind, is essential to our democratic way of

[*Catherine West*]

life, and we thank Greater Manchester police for their intense efforts in this regard. However, I have three brief questions to ask the Minister. First, will the officials removed by the Chinese Government be declared *personae non gratae*, to send a clear message about our dissatisfaction with their unwillingness to engage with the investigation? Secondly, has there been concerted engagement with international partners about the episode to prevent similar occurrences in New York, Canberra, Amsterdam or Ottawa? Finally, will there be fresh and concerted cross-Whitehall engagement to ensure that pro-democracy activists and Hongkongers are given the protection that they deserve here in the UK? Members of this House have spoken with one voice and I should like to hear a robust response from the Government.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As the Foreign Secretary said yesterday, the Vienna convention on consular relations allows states to withdraw members of a consular post at any point, and we were clear that we were asking the Chinese either to waive immunity or to do that. They have chosen that route. That is how the framework is set out. We are disappointed that these individuals will therefore not be interviewed, but it is absolutely right that those responsible will shortly be getting on to a plane and leaving the UK.

As the hon. Lady will know, issues across posts are discussed regularly and forcefully, and the Foreign Secretary has ensured that all our embassies are fully up to date on his very clear directions. As I have said, I know all of us in the House agree that we value that freedom of expression—that freedom to protest peacefully—and, indeed, ask others around the world to demonstrate it as well. We will continue to ensure that our police forces are able to do what they need to do, independent of Government direction. This is a framework of which we are all extremely proud, and often, wherever we are in the world, other countries note and are impressed by our ability to maintain it. We will continue to protect the rights of all who wish to demonstrate and share their views peacefully to do so.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I concur with everything the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), said. There was clear video evidence of outrageous violence by Chinese nationals, and the consul general admitted it. It is clear that the Government should have expelled the diplomats without having to wait for a police investigation. Any other person in this country guilty of such crimes would have been arrested at that stage. It is a clear admission of guilt that they have now scuttled off into the night back to China. At the very least, the Government must now retrospectively say that they are *personae non gratae*.

Will the Minister invite the Chinese ambassador, without coffee and biscuits, for a serious lesson on what freedom of expression actually means in this country? Will he say that when China eventually builds its new embassy it will allow free and peaceful demonstration outside, because that is what we do in this country, and that we will not tolerate intimidation of the many Hong Kong British overseas nationals coming to this country who are still at risk of the tentacles of the Chinese Communist Government using these sorts of bully boy tactics?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I note the very colourful description in my hon. Friend's request. I am pleased to update him with the fact that, in my new post, I have been able to meet the Chinese ambassador. Just last week, I went to pay my condolences on the death of President Zemin. I was able to sit and have a short conversation with the ambassador, during which I raised these issues, which at the time were ongoing. We will continue to meet, and I note the request for less of a welcome than perhaps one might otherwise give. It is really important to maintain those conversations and, as my hon. Friend says, ensure that every embassy accredited to the UK understands our values and our rights. All those who wish to demonstrate peacefully to raise concerns on any matter should be free to do so. We will continue to stand up to ensure that everyone across the UK understands that, and we will continue to support our police to allow that to happen.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), for forcing the Government to the Dispatch Box to address this issue.

The Minister and others are right about the right to protest—that must be protected. We cannot allow the creep-in of authoritarian tactics here. China removing the six individuals is not a success story for the UK. Justice has not been served. Does the Minister agree that the Chinese Communist party's actions show wilful disregard for the rule of law and the UK's diplomatic authority? Criminal investigations should have been progressed. The instigators of Bob Chan's assault will not now be held to account. The UK Government cannot think that that is acceptable. Does the Minister regret that? The UK Government have failed to act strategically on China while our allies and partners, including the US and Germany, have done so. The UK has not even published the long-promised strategy on China. When will that now be progressed?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I note the hon. Gentleman's request on the China strategy. I am afraid that I cannot provide any more detail at the moment—it is not in my purview to do so—but we continue to work very closely on it. He will have heard the Prime Minister, in his Guildhall speech a few weeks ago, set out very clearly what he described as “robust pragmatism”. We will be hearing further on that.

On this particular issue, it is really important to be clear that once the Greater Manchester police confirmed, after consultation with the Crown Prosecution Service, that it was satisfied that the level of injuries of one of the reported victims was consistent with a section 39 assault, we followed through with the action I set out. We gave the Chinese Government one week to comply with the request to waive privileges and immunities, so that the police could interview those involved and urge them to co-operate fully. They decided to use the diplomatic tools available to them to send their people home.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I was unaware until this incident that there was even a Chinese Government consulate in Manchester. May I suggest that we conduct a review into where all the consuls are? There are a number of embassies

outside London. We should ensure that they all have a police liaison officer so that everyone understands their duties and responsibilities here in the United Kingdom.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I will take that point away and discuss it with the team. Just as we have in many countries, there are consulates general not only at the main embassy but across large areas. Thinking of our own, the One HMG programme was done to help us bring together our trade and agriculture experts and those working in-country. He is quite right that we see consulates general across the UK for many embassies that are accredited to the Court of St James's. I will take that point away.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I join the Minister and the Opposition Front Bencher in praising Greater Manchester police. We should have not seen scenes such as that in our great city. I am disappointed that this issue has had to be raised as an urgent question, because the Foreign Secretary was making a statement on his Department's media channel about it last night. I am concerned that he is not here.

The Minister summed it up: these diplomats are accredited, so what happens when they are replaced in the consulate of Manchester? Will those officials have a semblance of the common good and allow encounter and dialogue, or will they be replaced with further state-sponsored thugs?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The Chinese embassy and Beijing will no doubt send a new consul general in due course. We will be clear, as we always are with all those who come to serve in their embassies in the UK, that we expect the highest standards from all staff. That will continue to be the case.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): China, of course, always displays its absolute contempt when it identifies weakness amongst its opponents and counter-parties, doesn't it?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The Foreign Secretary was clear with the Chinese embassy, and we have followed through. I am pleased that the outcome is that those whom Greater Manchester police identified as involved have been sent home by Beijing.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I concur with the congratulations to Greater Manchester police on their swift action to support the refugee in this case. I agree, very unusually, with the remarks of the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) about the consequences of, quite frankly, a lacklustre Government response. What do the Government think will be the response from China to this poor display?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I think the whole House agrees that Greater Manchester police behaved incredibly well through what was a difficult situation. As we have discussed, the Vienna convention on consular relations sets out clearly the rules of the road between all our diplomats across the world. We have always and will continue to expect the highest standards of behaviour and protocols here in the UK. We will reiterate that in due course.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Those exercising their freedoms here in the UK should never feel threatened or intimidated by the actions of foreign states. Can the Minister confirm how she is working with ministerial colleagues and Government agencies to establish and address other threats to freedom of expression by foreign actors? Could she make particular reference to concerns about Confucius Institutes, which have been raised in this place a number of times?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank my hon. Friend for all her work as the Prime Minister's envoy on freedom of religion or belief. Hers is an incredibly important voice that reaches across the world, setting out the UK's absolute clarity on our values. We will continue to do that. I hope she will be pleased to see the human rights report published, as promised, at the beginning of the week. We continue set out how the UK is leading on that. We continue to look across the piece at all centres. The Prime Minister has set out more work for us to do to ensure that all those who are here under diplomatic authority follow the rules of the road that we set out clearly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that this is only one incident in a pattern of behaviour by the Chinese Communist party, as others have referred to? The assaults on British journalists, the crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong and the genocidal activities taking place in Xinjiang province warrant greater international condemnation and action. Just yesterday, China attempted to stop Iran being ousted from the UN body tasked with empowering women's rights. That is what China does, and everybody is a target. Does she plan to raise this with her Chinese counterpart? Will accountability be applied on every occasion that the United Kingdom has to highlight issues of abuse by the Chinese Communist party?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman continues to be a great champion for those oppressed in many parts of the world. We now have a robust and active sanctions regime, and we use it firmly to make clear our views on those breaching it through either corruption or human rights aggressions where we can identify those. We have a number of sanctions on Chinese entities and individuals exactly along those lines, and I will be happy to write to him with more details about them, if that would be useful.

Alicia Kearns: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the written ministerial statement laid yesterday by the Foreign Secretary, the House was informed that the Chinese Communist party was given one week to waive immunity for those whom the police wanted to speak to. That deadline passed last night, but the Minister has just stated from the Dispatch Box that two Chinese consul staff remain in the UK and will leave shortly. Given that the deadline has passed and no action has been taken by the Government, may I seek your guidance on whether the House was misled when it was informed that a deadline had been set, or was it merely a rhetorical deadline?

Mr Speaker: As the Minister is here, she may want to correct that.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The consul general left the UK first. Of the remaining five, I do not have precise numbers on the last few—I am not sure whether it is two or three. We are waiting on an update from the Chinese embassy later today that all of those five have left the UK.

Mr Speaker: We may even come back to this on Monday, then, just for clarification.

Business of the House

10.57 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 19 December will include:

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 the 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.

The provisional business for the week commencing 9 January includes:

MONDAY 9 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Procurement Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 10 JANUARY—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Stamp Duty Land Tax (Reduction) Bill, followed by a general debate on a subject to be confirmed. On that point, I am aware that yesterday we had to pull a debate on Ukraine because of the Home Secretary's statement. Our solidarity with the people of Ukraine remains unwavering. I will be listening, as always, to suggestions from colleagues on what the topic of that future debate should be.

WEDNESDAY 11 JANUARY—Opposition day (11th allotted day). Debate in the name of the official Opposition on a subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 12 JANUARY—Debate on a motion on the current situation in Iran and the treatment of protestors, followed by a general debate on landfill tax fraud. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 13 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 16 January includes:

MONDAY 16 JANUARY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Online Safety Bill. The other business will be announced in the usual way.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the business, and may I start by wishing her and you, Mr Speaker, as well as all House staff, Members and their staff a very merry Christmas? Mr Speaker, did you know that 1843 was a very special year for the Victorian revival of Christmas? As well as the world's first Christmas cards, it also gave us one of Britain's best-loved novels, "A Christmas Carol", a beautiful story of the transformation of an unscrupulous boss who treats working people poorly, visited by three ghosts putting him on a path to redemption. Even Christmas miracles can only go so far, so I am not expecting the Government to follow suit, but let us give it a try anyway.

I will start with a reflective visit from the ghost of Christmas past. After 12 years of Tory failure, what have they actually achieved? What will they be remembered for in 30, 40 or 50 Christmases' time? This country feels

broken. Since 2010, national debt has soared. That was before the pandemic and Ukraine. Child poverty, crime and homelessness—up. The pound, healthy life expectancy and standards in public life—down. Labour’s Sure Start centres, libraries and football pitches across the country—closed. Where in the future business is a plan to fix all that? The British people deserve better.

Successive Tory Prime Ministers have said they would fix the crisis in social care. Most famously, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) on the steps of Downing Street promised to fix it “once and for all”. What happened to that plan? The sector is in crisis this Christmas. Do the Government have a plan? If so, will a Minister come to the House and answer Members’ important questions? On other health policy there is failure too. We were told that the Government’s 10-year plan for dementia would be published this year. Where is it?

Things do not get better with a visit from the ghost of Christmas present. We have a Tory cost of living crisis made in Downing Street and more than a decade of damage to our public services, leaving backlog Britain at breaking point, with backlogs in the courts and a fraction of asylum claims dealt with each year, costing the taxpayer millions in hotel costs and letting vulnerable people down. As for the NHS, we are heading into winter with more people waiting for treatment than at any time in history, and they are waiting longer than ever. Nothing is working and it is on the Government. They could be training 7,500 more doctors and 10,000 more nurses, paid for by abolishing the non-dom tax break. That is Labour’s plan; where is the Government’s? Where in the future business is the Bill to fix the NHS?

Then we have the ghost of Christmas yet to come. With the Tories, we are set for weaker economic growth, bigger backlogs and worsening crises, but the lesson from the story is that it does not have to be this way. There is hope. I am sad to say—actually, no I am not, but I will say it anyway—that it is not “PM4PM”. The alternative choice is a Keir Starmer-led Labour Government with an ambitious, bold, practical legislative agenda and a plan that speaks to people’s priorities, not a Government picking up Bills, waving them around for a bit and then dropping them when their Back Benchers do not like them anymore. We have housing targets gone, the Schools Bill gone, and the transport Bill missing in action.

Although I welcome the statement following business questions on the contaminated blood scandal, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) has been pushing for it since March. Given that one victim dies every four days, may I ask the Leader of the House to push for more regular updates next year?

I was glad to hear the Leader of the House say recently that she will be sticking around to fight the next general election. She knows that since she was appointed to the role, I have enjoyed our exchanges, and I will enjoy them even more when we swap places. As we look to 2023, can I ask her to make a new year’s resolution to end Government disdain for Parliament? Will the Government treat Members and our constituents with respect and answer written parliamentary questions and correspondence on time? Will they provide comprehensive copies of the correct ministerial statements to you, Mr Speaker, and to Opposition Front Benchers? Will

they get their act together and stop dropping Bills and promises to voters? Whether the Government can muster the courage to call a general election next year, or we have to wait until 2024, Labour is ready. We have a plan, and we are ready to win. Happy new year.

Penny Mordaunt: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for presiding over the minute’s silence we had earlier today. It was an historic moment to mark the 80th anniversary of the first time the House heard about what we now know as the holocaust. Because of that, I hope you will allow me just to put the names of the survivors who joined us today on record. Thank you to Mala Tribich MBE, Steven Frank BEM, Dr Alfred Garwood, John Hajdu MBE, Joan Salter MBE, Dr Martin Stern MBE and Yvonne Bernstein. I also thank the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for their work. I am sure all hon. Members would concur with that.

We had two important visits this week, from His Majesty the King and, more significantly, Santa. I had a letter from the children in the nursery, who were keen for me to put on record our thanks to Santa for visiting them this Christmas and to assure them that we will not have to put minimum service standards into legislation for Santa and his elves; they will be working over Christmas. I also put on record my thanks to the staff of the House, who have done an incredible job this autumn term with some important events. I wish them all a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

I turn to the hon. Lady’s points. On the infected blood inquiry, I am pleased that more information has come forward. We need to keep people informed. I set up the compensation study and it is incredibly important that those interim payments are made and that people are fully compensated for the suffering they have had to endure.

I knew that the hon. Lady would make a Christmas-themed statement today, and she never disappoints. She talked about the ghost of Christmas past, but if it appeared and took us back to pre-2010, we would discover some interesting things. For example, the unemployment rate, which is now 3.5%, was consistently 8% under Labour. During the entire period that the Conservatives have been in coalition or full Administration, council tax has gone up by 36%; in the same timeframe under Labour, it went up by 110%. On that trend, people would be paying £1,000 extra on their council tax bills today.

We have reduced fuel duty by 7.5%; Labour put it up by 42%. If that trend had continued, it would be 81p per litre. We now have 10% more good or outstanding schools; in Labour’s Wales, teaching numbers have fallen by 10%. We also know that in Wales, where Labour is in Government, waiting lists are five times higher than in England. The Defence budget is now in balance, but when we came into office in 2010, the deficit, including the equipment programme, was £71 billion, thanks to Labour—twice the size of the Defence budget.

That is why, although we have faced tough times and there are tough times ahead this winter, I thank my lucky stars that this Government are leading the country through them, because Labour’s record speaks volumes about its inability to do that. Every time the Conservatives come to power, our country is improved; every time Labour comes to power, the reverse is true. I sincerely

[Penny Mordaunt]

hope that when the ghost of Christmas present visits us, it will be to celebrate a fifth historic term for a Conservative Administration. Happy Christmas, everyone.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): A very happy Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and the staff of the House. The main post office in Tunbridge Wells has been closed since 30 November and has missed the whole Christmas period because of a squabble about who is responsible for repairs to the building. Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to intervene with the Post Office to stop inconveniencing my constituents in that way, reopen the post office and sort out the dispute without detriment to my constituents?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the issue that my right hon. Friend raises; it sounds as though some heads need knocking together. As Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions are not until 17 January, I shall write to the Department on his behalf and ask the Secretary of State to look at the matter urgently.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): First, may I pass on the apologies of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who is unable to be here, due to family circumstances?

I wish everyone a merry Christmas, and I hope everyone has a guid new year—if *Hansard* do not know how to spell “guid” by noo, I am happy to help with the spelling at some other point. I also echo the Leader of the House’s statement on the holocaust survivors who were able to join us today. The year before 1942, my home town was obliterated by national socialism, in the worst aerial bombardment suffered in these islands during the second world war. My constituency stands in solidarity, as I am sure the entire House does, with those across Europe who survived the holocaust under national socialism and with those whose memories we commemorated today.

Becoming Chief Whip for the SNP—and then suddenly and very briefly shadow Leader of the House—has made it a bit of a strange week, but I am delighted to take up my new position. I was also delighted that everyone on the Opposition side of the House gave us some hope for 2023, when they decided to say no to probably one of the worst ten-minute rule Bills that this House has ever seen. It was a quite hideous and horrendous piece of proposed legislation, supported by some senior Members on the Government’s Back Benches. I am glad that the Government at least gave us a bit of hope by making sure that the payroll did not turn up to vote for it, so we are grateful for that.

As a child of the ’70s, I have to say that there is a whiff of Christmas past this year. We are seeing nurses out on strike across the road at St Thomas’s—I wish them well, as I am sure most Members in the House do, with their deliberations and their demands for improvements. At least in Scotland we do not have that dispute; the Scottish Government have settled it, and we are moving forward in the hope that we can build an NHS fit for the future.

I wish all Members and staff a very merry Christmas and a guid new year. In the forthcoming period, if Scotland cannot leave the voluntary Union, I wonder

whether the Leader of the House will be able to tell us, if England decides to leave the Union—if it is voluntary—what opportunity there will be for it to do so. The Government clearly do not want to discuss Scotland’s position, which we raised yesterday, and which the Government voted against.

Given that there is a whiff of the ’70s, I am glad that we have a Scottish Parliament to stand up for Scotland, to defend the weakest in our society and to make sure that, as we head into the deepest element of this cost of living crisis, there is hope for the new year at least in Scotland. We on the SNP Benches will continue to be Scotland’s voice and to demand the right to national self-determination.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman and send my good wishes to his colleague, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock)—I am sorry not to be able to wish her a good Christmas in person.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the most vulnerable in society. This Government have not just acted to protect people this winter by providing cost of living payments and extra money to the Scottish Government to enable those to happen, but we have increased benefits in line with inflation—that is our record, as well as introducing the triple lock. If the Scottish Government were so aggrieved, the hon. Gentleman needs to explain why they did not take up their powers on controlling welfare payments earlier, as they could have done. They were very happy to leave things with the UK Government for longer than they needed to.

The hon. Gentleman did not actually mention Scottish independence until the very last moment in his speech. I thought he might be setting a record by talking about other issues, but he let himself down at the last moment. Normally, I am pretty brutal with his colleague, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith, who is not here today. However, in the Christmas spirit, I will not just outline all the rational arguments that I do every week for why we are better together as the United Kingdom—the £2,000 tax dividend; the strength of our defence and security; our global reach; and our ability to offer support in a crisis situation, whether it is cost of living issues or any help needed, for example, with the ongoing situation in Shetland, where His Majesty’s armed forces are available to step up and help. Sometimes we forget that the arguments for the Union are ones that appeal not just in the head but to the heart. The reason so many people in this place object to the SNP’s obsession with independence is that it will rip apart a family of nations and the families that live in those nations. That is my Christmas message to the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues this year.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): All this year, Hindus across the world have been celebrating Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s birth centenary. That culminates with a festival that begins today in Ahmedabad, where, literally, millions of Hindus will gather, culminating in the opening of a new mandir. Thousands of our constituents will be visiting, so, as we celebrate Christmas, will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing those travelling to India a very successful festival? Can we have a debate in the new year on the contribution made by Pramukh Swami Maharaj in building more than 1,100 temples across the world, so that Hindus can celebrate their religion?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for providing me the opportunity to wish all those travelling for that festival well, and all his constituents a very merry Christmas. He will know that there is an opportunity for a debate in the new year, as announced in the forthcoming business, and I have heard his bid for that today.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I have a little Christmas advertisement on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee. We are very much open for business. We welcome applications from Back-Bench Members for debates in Westminster Hall on Tuesdays and Thursdays and here in the Chamber usually on Thursday afternoons. The Clerks to the Committee are situated in the Table Office and are very happy to assist and advise Members on how to apply for debates and provide them with application forms. Applications are expected to be cross-party and have support from a significant number of Members.

The debate on Tuesday on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment will be led by my friend and colleague, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee.

Following the minute's silence this morning to commemorate the recognition of the holocaust, may I give advance notice that we have an application on the stocks for a debate to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day, which we would like to be aired on 26 January, the day before Holocaust Memorial Day itself.

Mr Speaker, I wish you, Members across the House and every member of staff the very best for the Christmas season and all the very best for 2023.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for all the work that he has done over the past year to facilitate the Backbench Business Committee. I endorse his advert for people to come forward with debates and also to ensure that those debates are well-attended and lively. I know that many organisations outside this House will want to see us debating the issues that they care about, and he provides us with an excellent service in doing that.

I thank him also for notice of the topic on 26 January. I look forward to hearing the issues that people want to raise next week, on 20 December. I also look forward to hearing the announcement of the topic for the debate on the first Thursday back, on 12 January.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I very much welcome the debate on 12 January on the situation in Iran, but can we also have a debate in Government time on what more we can do to protect the rights of women around the world? Yesterday, the United Nations sent a very strong message to Iran by expelling its representatives from the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Will my right hon. Friend join the United Nations in sending a strong message that a regime that brutally represses women and girls and then hangs in public young men who stand up for them has no place on any committee in any country anywhere in the world?

Penny Mordaunt: As I said in my opening remarks, we will be having a debate on Iran, but let me thank my hon. Friend for providing the opportunity, not just for me, but for the whole House, to say very clearly that, although the House may not be sitting over the Christmas period, all Members will have their eyes on what is happening to protesters and to those who are currently in detention. The world is watching and it will continue to do so, and we will continue to shine a spotlight on what is happening in Iran.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Mr Speaker, may I start by wishing you and all the House staff a very happy Christmas? I also wish to thank you for holding the minute's silence to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the notification of the holocaust to our predecessors—that was very moving.

We are seeing a flatlining in life expectancy. In my constituency and in other areas of the north, our life expectancy is reducing. We are also seeing an increase in health inequalities. Dementia is now the leading cause of death. As a former public health consultant and chair of a trust, I was proud of the work the previous Labour Government did to reduce those inequalities and to be the first to have a dementia strategy. Will the Leader of the House agree to have a debate in the new year on the health of our nation and, in particular, on how we are going to build back fairer, which I understand was a commitment of the previous Government earlier this year?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising a matter of concern to every Member in this House. Clearly, there is a massive catch-up job to be done, not just on the waiting lists that we are cracking through, but on ensuring that people are mentally well and dentally fit—all those things that they may have missed out on, particularly during the pandemic. I shall certainly make sure that the Health Secretary has heard her request.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): Good morning, Mr Speaker. May I take the opportunity to wish one and all a happy Christmas? Following the letter sent to the Prime Minister in November by the South Yorkshire police and crime commissioner urging the Government not to build any more so-called “smart motorways”, which were introduced in 2006 by the Labour party, and the detailed witness testimonies and the Select Committee on Transport reports on the same issue, may I ask my right hon. and gallant Friend the Leader of the House whether she will allow Government time for a debate on the future of smart motorways across the UK?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The next Transport questions are on 19 January, but, as that is a little time away, I will write to the Secretary of State to ask him to update my hon. Friend on the progress of analysing the safety data from the roll-out of smart motorways, and to keep him and his office informed.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I, too, pay respect to the survivors of the holocaust who came to Parliament this morning? Although I was not alive at the time, the shame will never leave me that these atrocities were committed by the country of my origin.

[Wera Hobhouse]

I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as I ask this question. The ban on no-fault evictions is long overdue and I am pleased that the Government are committed to ending them. But the illegal eviction law must be reformed at the same time, otherwise we risk frustrated landlords taking unjustified actions to evict their tenants via that way. The current law on illegal evictions is incredibly difficult to understand and is rarely enforced. It needs to change at the same time and I hope that the Government will engage with the lawyers and organisations that are raising this concern. In the meantime, will the Leader of the House indicate when we can expect the renters' reform Bill, which was promised by the end of the year?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know that I am going to say that future business will be announced in the usual way, but I know that this is a priority for the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Levelling-up questions will be the first questions session of the new year, when I encourage her to raise that point directly with the Secretary of State.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): My constituent Jenny Green, president of the RAF Widows' Association, lost her husband Group Captain William Green in a Tornado crash over the North sea in 1990. The crash was attributed to negligence, despite guidelines stating clearly that this should only be

"where there is no doubt whatsoever".

That wording was further strengthened in 1994. This is obviously a matter of great concern to my constituent, so may we have a debate on the process of attributing negligence in tragic incidents such as this?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for continuing to raise this matter. He will know that when the Ministry of Defence has looked at this and other issues, it has a judgment to make about whether a future inquiry would be in the public interest. The difficulty is, of course, that this is not necessarily a public interest, but a very private interest for family members and others involved. I will write to the Department on his behalf and ask it to explore other ways in which perhaps there could be some closure for that family.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): Season's greetings to you, Mr Speaker, and all members of staff of the House. On today's nurses' action, which has been taken most reluctantly, I want to say that two of the closest members of my family were gravely ill for weeks in Yorkshire hospitals, and I had an accident and almost lost the use of my leg, which was recovered thanks to the skill of the staff. The nurses looked after all three of us, as they do tens of thousands of other patients every day. They do not ask for anything, except that we leave that hospital better than we came in. They stand by us; it is time we stood by them. The Leader of the House no doubt believes she is an extremely persuasive person, and no doubt she is, so can she not, over the weekend, persuade the Prime Minister to make a statement on Monday or Tuesday—since there is another action on Tuesday—that he will resolve the nurses' case to their satisfaction so that we can have a Christmas where the NHS begins to rebuild?

Penny Mordaunt: I know every Member of this House will have similar stories to the ones the hon. Gentleman alludes to. We owe a huge amount to our healthcare professionals and all those who supported him. He knows that an inflation-matching pay increase for all public sector workers, which would be around 11%, would cost £28 billion, about £1,000 per household. What we must do to keep our NHS strong and reward those who work in it is to get our economy going and control inflation, and that is what this Government are focused on.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Town centres are at the heart of our communities, and yesterday evening Conservative-controlled Rugby Borough Council adopted an ambitious long-term strategy for the regeneration of Rugby town centre, bringing together private and public sector investment to create a vibrant destination for leisure and retail as well as increasing amounts of residential accommodation. Might we have a debate on the supporting role that Government can play in enabling the regeneration of our town centres up and down the country?

Penny Mordaunt: As a former high streets Minister, I was excited to hear what Rugby is doing. My hon. Friend will know we have invested £2.4 billion in town deals and more than £830 million in future high streets funding. Obviously, the nearly £5 billion in levelling-up funding will be invested in town centres and high streets too. It is also critical that we share good practice, so I hope that Rugby council will put what it has done on the high streets website in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities so that others can learn from its good practice.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Many people across the UK face Christmas misery as online shopping deliveries have been delayed or lost by delivery firm Evri. After expressing concerns about this company on social media, I have been inundated with stories of late or lost parcels, no or poor customer service, drivers earning less than the national living wage, drivers' pay being withheld and a pathetic petrol allowance that is insufficient to cover increased fuel charges. This is a classic case of corporate greed over staff welfare and customer service. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to make a statement regarding this company?

Penny Mordaunt: I am shocked to hear that from the hon. Lady and I will immediately ask the Business Secretary to get one of his Ministers to look into it, as people are waiting on deliveries, particularly over the Christmas period. The message to companies that want to short-change their workers and their customers is that not only will they lose their workforce and their customers, but she will also give them a spanking on the Floor of this House.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): Community pharmacies play a vital role in our communities, and across the Bolsover constituency. Not only do they provide important medical services, but they also provide somewhere for the elderly to go in order to discuss their condition. Will my right hon. Friend find time to debate the importance

of independent community pharmacies, and the vital role they play in promoting community cohesion and supporting residents in rural towns and villages?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for providing me with the opportunity also to thank the healthcare professionals who work in that sector. We do not have to convince the Prime Minister of what my hon. Friend has said, as he is very aware of the important role that community pharmacies play. Such places play a vital role in ensuring that people stay fit and healthy over the winter months, and I encourage my hon. Friend to raise the issue again at Health and Social Care questions on 24 January.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Today is the fifth day this month that members of the Communication Workers Union are taking industrial action at Royal Mail. Having spoken to a number of superb postal workers in my constituency, I have real concerns about the way the company is being run. It has gone from making a huge profit to losing hundreds of millions of pounds in 12 months. It has prioritised parcels over letter delivery, and it now wants to drop the universal service obligation. If the future of the Royal Mail is for it to become a gig economy courier company, that will have huge implications for the quality of service and the terms and conditions of postal workers. That is something on which this House ought to have an opinion, so may we have a debate about the future of Royal Mail?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that questions to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are not until the second week we are back, so I will write to the Secretary of State on his behalf to ensure that he has heard those concerns.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): May I wish you, Mr Speaker, your staff, and all Members a very happy Christmas?

With the current cost of living pressures and freezing weather conditions, this Christmas will be busier than ever for our wonderful charities, social enterprises and voluntary and community sector organisations. I am sure we all want to thank them for the incredible work they do. In my constituency, hundreds of organisations will be going the extra mile this year. Those include YMCA North Staffordshire, Stoke city community trust, the Hubb Foundation, Saltbox, Citizens Advice, Better Together community support group, Sutton Trust community group, Stoke Samaritans, Caudwell Children, University Hospitals of North Midlands NHS Trust Charity, Savana, and Helping Angels, as well as vast numbers of faith charities that work to help those most in need. I can only highlight a few, but I enormously appreciate them all. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking those wonderful organisations, and will she make parliamentary time available to debate the creation of a community wealth fund from the dormant assets funding?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the incredible work that voluntary and social organisations do every day, and particularly at this time of the year. She will know that the Government are considering the use of dormant assets for community wealth funds,

following a consultation run earlier this year. That response from the Government is due out in the new year, and may well coincide with 26 January and the next questions to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): A constituent of mine received a penalty charge notice from a private car parking company called Smart Parking, which stated that because he had not paid a measly £1 fee he was to pay a £60 fine. He did pay the fee, and he challenged the fine, which has now risen to £100. He took it all the way to the ombudsman, which ruled against him due to a lack of evidence. I have asked the company whether it carried out any investigation involving CCTV or balance on the meter, without a satisfactory reply. Such complaints seem to be a widespread problem, according to many reviews on Trustpilot, so may we have a debate on private parking regulation?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the difficulties of the hon. Gentleman's constituent. If he wants to give me further details of the concerns about that company, I will write on his behalf to the Secretary of State and make sure that the issue is flagged with him.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): On 5 January 1983, Police Constables Angela Bradley, Gordon Connolly and Colin Morrison tragically died while attempting to rescue a man off the Blackpool coast. Their loss is felt to this day in my constituency and by the Lancashire police force. A memorial service to mark the 40th anniversary of the tragedy will take place next month. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to their tremendous bravery? Will she find time for a debate in which hon. Members can highlight the exceptional contribution that police officers make in our communities?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the matter and for getting those brave individuals' names into today's *Hansard*. I will certainly ensure that the matter is raised with the Home Office and that we consider how we can further mark their incredible service and sacrifice. This is a week in which we have all been very aware of the tragedy of people drowning in cold water.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Perhaps we could have a debate on the accurate use of Charles Dickens as a political metaphor. Much as I hate to contradict my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and the Leader of the House, Ebenezer Scrooge was visited by four ghosts. The first was the ghost of Jacob Marley, who was condemned to roam the earth, dragging chains behind him as a penance for his meanness during life. After the Government's miserliness in refusing even to meet nurses to discuss a pay increase, may I remind the Leader of the House of the message of Jacob Marley, namely that redemption is available? Does she agree that the Government ought to meet the nurses to discuss a decent pay rise before Christmas?

Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker—and, as Tiny Tim said, “God bless Us, Every One!”

Penny Mordaunt: As a Portsmouth MP, I am delighted that Charles Dickens is featuring so heavily in this business question, but I repeat the answer that I gave

[Penny Mordaunt]

earlier. We value our NHS staff tremendously. The Minister who has been primarily concerned with the matter—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield)—is a nurse. We understand the incredible job that nurses do very well, but we also have to ensure that we are able to control inflation and that pay rises in the public sector are affordable.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Transport in South Yorkshire is devolved to our Mayor, who boasts a budget of some £225 million and an investment fund worth £900 million over 30 years. While Greater Manchester and Teesside are steaming ahead with their devolution deals, South Yorkshire is being ignored. My constituents want answers about the daily cancellations of buses between Worksop and Dinnington and the scrapping of routes to Crystal Peaks. I myself have written several letters to the Mayor on the subject, some of which I sent as long ago as September. None of them has been answered.

The one time the Mayor turned up to Rother Valley to discuss the buses, he held a meeting to which neither I nor the local councillors and parish councillors were invited. It was not even advertised on social media. I gather that only about 10 Labour activists were in attendance. Can we have a debate on how to make the South Yorkshire mayoral combined authority more accountable for the issues for which it is responsible in Rother Valley?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the difficulties my hon. Friend is having and about how his constituents are being short-changed. He mentions the budget for the mayoral combined authority; it has also received £1.6 million from the local transport authority recovery fund from April to December this year. Levelling Up questions are on 9 January and Transport questions are on 19 January, but in the meantime I shall write to both Secretaries of State to flag up my hon. Friend's concerns.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This morning, I joined nurses—caring, professional and dedicated nurses—on the picket line. They told me that the reason they are going out on strike is the retention issues among their workforce. Staff are leaving because they simply cannot afford to work any more. They are going to agencies, which is costing the NHS even more. It is therefore crucial that the Government stop grandstanding on the issue and hiding behind the pay review body. Instead, I ask the Leader of the House to go to Cabinet and ask the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Health Secretary to come to the negotiating table now and settle this pay dispute.

Penny Mordaunt: In addition to what I have already said in this session, the Health Secretary understands that there are issues other than pay; it is about the environment and new practices that the Royal College of Nursing wants to bring in. He has said that he is very happy to discuss those matters. Pay increases have to be affordable, and we are always minded of the strength of the workforce going forward, which is why we are pleased that we have record numbers of people wanting to come into nursing.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Year on year, the number of people who lose their life to alcohol rises in this country. It has risen 7.4% in the last year—that is 2,000 more people dying from alcohol this year than in 2019. Every death is a tragedy, and it is also preventable, and yet this Government seem to have done very little, if anything at all, to tackle this public health crisis. They even fail to implement evidence-based policies, which baffles not just me but many professionals. How many more people must die before the Government accept that alcohol harm is out of control in this country? Will the Leader of the House speak to Cabinet and the Prime Minister about whether the Government will conduct an independent review of alcohol in the style of the Dame Carol Black report on drugs?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Our healthcare policy is evidence-based, and it is also important that we scale good initiatives that are taking place in the NHS—for example, alcohol screening for people who come into accident and emergency, which has had a huge impact on getting people into treatment when they need it, and the work we have done over the last five years in particular that has led to homelessness being reduced by 50%, which has wrapped the care and support that those individuals need around them. However, he raises an important matter, and I will write to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on his behalf to flag his concerns.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): A constituent of mine applied for a visa for his mother-in-law to come to the UK from Ukraine. The application was made in August, and the family has received no further updates. I have contacted the Home Office myself, only to be kept waiting for weeks and told that it cannot help without the applicant's permission, failing to recognise that she is stuck in a war-torn country. Can we have a debate on the action that can be taken to help this lady and no doubt countless others like her and to address the failings in the Home Office?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about that case. As I advertised at the start of this session, there are opportunities for debates, and we are always keen to hear suggestions from Members. I am sure that Ukraine will be a frontrunner for that, but let us not wait for that; let us try to get his constituency case sorted today. The Home Office is providing a new service where it is possible to have a bespoke surgery with a caseworker, and my office will be in touch with his office later today to help him set that up. It is very important that we get these things sorted swiftly, and we will assist his office to do that.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, may I take this opportunity to wish you and all House staff a merry Christmas and happy Hanukkah? Last month the House of Commons Commission agreed to launch a consultation on excluding Members of Parliament charged with violent or sexual offences from the parliamentary estate. In proposing the highest possible threshold for even considering exclusion, this House risks making Parliament a less safe space to work, making things easier for perpetrators and even more intolerable for survivors of sexual violence among our community here. Will the Leader of the House meet me to discuss this matter and my concerns about the process of consultation undertaken?

Penny Mordaunt: There is a reason why we have consultations on these matters—it is so that people can express their views, and I urge the hon. Lady to contribute to that. I put this consultation forward with other members of the Commission, and it is a very important principle that people are innocent until proven guilty. Clearly, for certain charges, there would be concerns about workplace safety and so forth, but it was felt that having the point being at charge rather than arrest would be a better balance between that important principle and the potential damage to an individual who is perhaps falsely charged and has claims made against them. There is a reason why we are consulting on this. Members should respond to that and encourage their members of staff to respond. My door is open to all Members, as I am sure is the case for other members of the Commission, the shadow Leader of the House and Mr Speaker too.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House check whether Ministers are on strike? I ask because, as she knows, I have been trying to get a meeting with the Secretary of State for Transport for many months—the Secretary of State keeps changing—about the Rhondda tunnel. The Leader of the House is still very welcome to come and be dangled down my hole.

I am meant to be co-chairing, with a Minister, the programme board on creating a national strategy for acquired brain injury. I have been trying to get a meeting with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care since July. Admittedly, he was sacked in September and reappointed in October; but none the less, it has been many months and I still cannot get a meeting with even the junior Minister for social care, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). It really does feel as if they are not taking their job seriously.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman is being rather unfair to my colleagues. I had an incident in my constituency yesterday about which I needed to contact the Health Secretary, and he responded within the hour. I am always here to facilitate such meetings. I have to say, the hon. Gentleman's previous invitation to Rhondda did not sell it to me. It sounded like I might be taking my life in my hands, but of course I am always happy to visit his constituency.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I wish everyone a happy Christmas, especially you, Mr Speaker, and the staff who look after us in this place.

Because I get better answers at business questions than I do at Transport questions, I will update the Leader of the House on this week's disastrous timetable changes imposed by the Department for Transport. My usual train normally goes to Charing Cross, but this morning I was forced to change at London Bridge. Imagine my shock when the entire train, more than 1,000 people, got up to change at London Bridge. These changes are inconveniencing thousands of people on their morning commute to work. Can we have a statement from the fat controller in the Department for Transport about these disastrous changes, so that we can find out when the situation will be rectified?

Penny Mordaunt: I will write to the Department for Transport today for the hon. Gentleman. Transport questions is not until 19 January, and I am sure his constituents would appreciate engagement before then.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): May I press the Leader of the House on her answer to the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) and ask for a statement from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on when he is actually going to level up? The round 2 levelling-up bids were submitted in early autumn, and we still do not have a date for when the announcements will be made. Two superb bids for Wythenshawe and Sale town centres, which will bring in cultural and business activity and unlock thousands of homes and hundreds of millions of pounds in investment, have been submitted by Manchester City Council and Trafford Borough Council. Can we have that statement, please?

Penny Mordaunt: I wish the hon. Gentleman good luck with his bids, which sound very exciting. I remind him that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will be the first to face questions when the House returns after the Christmas recess. I hope he is in attendance.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Richard Hughes, the chair of the Office for Budget Responsibility, has said that

“a series of dramatic swings in policy with five major fiscal statements delivered by three consecutive governments”

has cost taxpayers more than £40 billion in extra debt in just six months. That is £600 for every man, woman and child in the UK. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out why she believes it is acceptable for taxpayers to pay the price for Westminster's economic incompetence?

Penny Mordaunt: We are facing very difficult times across the country and we are coming out of a pandemic where we have had unprecedented demand on the public purse. I notice that the Scottish Government will outline their Budget today, and I look forward to Audit Scotland's commentary, when it is produced.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): As we are all getting into the Christmas spirit, can we spare a thought for my constituents who have been well and truly Scrooged by their former employer? In the summer, Orchard House Foods announced the closure of its site in my constituency, with the loss of 430 jobs. Many of those staff were expecting their redundancy and final payment on 9 December, but the night before, they received an email telling them that that would not happen. Can we have a statement from the Government on the situation at Orchard House Foods and attempt to ensure that the staff get the money as quickly as possible?

Penny Mordaunt: I am extremely sorry to hear that; it is a terrible thing for the workforce to have had to deal with, especially at this time of year. I shall write to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy this afternoon and ask it to get in touch with the hon. Lady's office to advise on whether there is anything we can do to assist. I hope that her constituents have a good Christmas.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Home Office admits that it is working outside the 60-day service standard for family reunion applications, but the situation is actually so bad that my Syrian

[Alan Brown]

constituent, Ahmed, has been waiting 10 months for a decision for his family. They have already fled Syria to Istanbul, where they have been subjected to racism, and Ahmed is further worried given last month's terrorist incident in the city. Will the Leader of the House advise us on what is being done to resolve the backlog of family reunion applications, and can my constituent's case finally be expedited after his 10-month wait?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about that case. Every year, about 5,000 such cases are processed successfully, with those people being reunited with their families. As I said, the Home Office is now offering a one-to-one service. If the hon. Gentleman has had difficulty in accessing it, my office would be happy to facilitate that.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Last week, along with other Wirral MPs, I met headteachers representing primary schools right across Wirral. They told us of the severe financial challenges that they face. Despite the announcement in the autumn statement, they are extremely concerned about how they will be able to pay the staffing costs and heating bills, and in some instances, they simply cannot. They are facing very difficult choices. One school has even invested in a set of fleeces for the children to wear in class because there is insufficient heating in the school, as the school cannot afford it. I am extremely concerned about the evidence that I have heard. This is an incredibly serious situation. When parents drop their children off at school, they have the right to expect that children will be in schools that are warm, fully resourced and properly staffed. Can we have a debate on funding in primary schools as a matter of urgency?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about that particular case. In addition to the £5 billion in education recovery funding, we announced a further £500 million in the past few days to help schools with energy efficiency.

No school should have to have the heating off, and I am very concerned to hear about the hon. Lady's case. As a consequence, I will contact the Department for Education today and ask it to look into that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This is the last business questions of the year, and as such I take this opportunity to thank the Leader of the House for the statements of support that she has made for vulnerable religious minorities during the year. Pathway 3 of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme has been formally open for nearly a year. It was meant to provide safe immigration routes to resettle up to 20,000 particularly vulnerable people, including religious minorities, women and members of the LGBT community. Despite numerous written and oral questions in the House of Commons and in the other place, there is little transparency on the numbers of people resettled in the UK under pathway 3. As such, will the Leader of the House make space in Government time for a debate on that matter?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. I am always pleased to be able to turn a spotlight on those issues, and will continue to do so. I shall certainly raise his concerns with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Home Office. He will know that there is sometimes a lag before we receive data; he will also know that the Prime Minister—as he said this week—wants to be very clear about the legal and safe routes for people who are still trapped in that country and who could perhaps come here and be reunited with their families. I will flag up the issue with both Departments and ask them to update the hon. Gentleman.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Lord President of the Council and everyone else who took part in that item of business. I will pause for a second to allow changes of personnel before calling the Paymaster General to make a statement on infected blood.

Infected Blood Inquiry

11.55 am

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement to update the House on our preparations for the infected blood inquiry, which is expected to conclude next year.

I took over as the Minister sponsoring the inquiry on 25 October. While I have been aware of this issue for many years, as have so many of us who have been contacted by affected constituents, undertaking this role has further impressed on me its scale and gravity—not only the direct, dreadful consequences for victims, but the stigma and trauma experienced by many of those infected, by their families, and by those who care for them. I recognise that, tragically, we continue to see victims of infected blood die prematurely, and I also recognise that time is of the essence.

I commend the work of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood. I am pleased to have met the co-chairs, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), and I am grateful for their insight.

In July 2017 my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) established the infected blood inquiry, chaired by Sir Brian Langstaff. My predecessor as Paymaster General, the current Leader of the House, went further by commissioning a study from Sir Robert Francis KC, which is entitled “Compensation and redress for the victims of infected blood: recommendations for a framework”. The purpose of the study was clear, namely to ensure that the Government were in a position to fully consider and act on the recommendations. Sir Robert delivered it in March this year.

The Government had intended to publish a response alongside the study itself, ahead of Sir Robert’s evidence to Sir Brian Langstaff’s inquiry. However, as the then Paymaster General explained, the sheer complexity and wide range of factors revealed in Sir Robert’s excellent work meant that when the study was published by the Government on 7 June, it was not possible to publish a comprehensive response. The Government remained absolutely committed to using the study to prepare for the outcome of the Langstaff inquiry, and that is still the case.

On 29 July, in response to Sir Robert’s recommendations, Sir Brian Langstaff published an interim report on interim compensation. It called for an interim payment of £100,000 to be paid to all those infected and all bereaved partners currently registered on UK infected blood support schemes, and to those who registered between 29 July and the inception of any future scheme. The Government accepted that recommendation in full on 17 August. Quite rightly, a huge amount of work was undertaken across Government during the ensuing weeks to ensure that the interim payments could be exempt from tax and disregarded for the purpose of benefits, and that an appropriate delivery mechanism existed. This involved work across many Departments, and with the devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Interim compensation is just one part of our overall response, but it was important that we got it right.

I fully recognise that interim compensation was but one of the recommendations in Sir Robert’s study. I want to stress to the House and to the many people who have a direct and personal interest in the inquiry that those interim payments were only the start of the process, and work is ongoing in consideration of Sir Robert’s other recommendations. I am pleased that all the interim payments were made by the end of October. Sir Robert recognised in his study that the Government could not give in advance a commitment on the exact shape that redress will take. Our comprehensive response must await the final report of the infected blood inquiry. However, I want to assure those affected that this Government, which delivered a statutory inquiry and interim compensation, remain absolutely committed to our intentions in commissioning the compensation framework study. Accordingly, and recognising the need to continue to build trust with the affected community, I want to share with the House the progress we are making.

A cross-Government working group, co-ordinated by the Cabinet Office, is taking forward work strands informed by Sir Robert’s recommendations. A cross-departmental group at permanent secretary level has been convened, chaired by the Cabinet Office second permanent secretary, Sue Gray, to oversee that work. I am pleased to be able to say that Sir Robert has agreed to provide independent transparent advice to the group as work progresses. I am grateful to him for his continued input into our thinking. It is my intention over the coming months to update the House on progress and, where it is possible, to provide greater clarity on the Government’s response to Sir Robert’s recommendations prior to Sir Brian’s report being published.

In the meantime, I wish to make clear one critical answer to a recommendation posed by Sir Robert. In the first recommendation of his study, Sir Robert sets out that there is in his view a moral case for compensation to be paid. The Government accept that recommendation. There is a moral case for the payment of compensation. We have made that clear in our actions with the payment of interim compensation. I now want to make it equally clear on the Floor of the House. The Government recognise that the scheme utilised must be collaborative and sympathetic, and as user-friendly, supportive and free of stress as possible, while being consistent with the Government’s approach to protect against fraud. The Government will ensure those principles are adopted.

We have significant work to do to ensure we are ready for Sir Brian’s report. For example, Sir Robert makes detailed findings and recommendations about the delivery of the scheme, which must be worked through in discussion with the devolved Administrations. Work will need to be undertaken to ensure, in line with his recommendation, that final compensation can be made free of tax and disregarded for benefits purposes.

We know, too, that the inquiry will make recommendations in relation to bereaved parents and children. In his interim report, Sir Brian made clear his view that the moral case for their compensation is beyond doubt. Sir Brian recognised that the approach to compensating this group of people is complex and the Government must be ready to quickly address recommendations relating to them. The work in consideration of the study will ensure that the Government are prepared to act swiftly in response to Sir Brian Langstaff’s final recommendations relating to compensation.

[Jeremy Quin]

Those infected and affected have suffered enough. Having commissioned both the inquiry and the report, the Government have further shown their commitment in our actions by the payment of interim compensation. Sir Brian and Sir Robert have both ensured that the voices of those infected and affected are front and centre of their work, and I, too, hope to be able to meet and hear from people directly affected as our work progresses. We have much to do, but I wish to assure the House—this is why I wished to be here today—that this is a priority for the Government and we will continue to progress it. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister.

12.2 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for the statement, which is welcome but long overdue. It is very disappointing that the Government did not find time for an oral statement in the House earlier this year when they published Sir Robert's report. Ministers were dragged kicking and screaming to publish the report when it was leaked. That has been the pattern throughout this long painful process and it seems no different today.

Victims of the contaminated blood scandal will be watching today with great interest. Heartbreakingly, many of those infected have not lived to see today's exchanges and the prospect of proper justice at the end of the inquiry. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) has campaigned tirelessly to raise awareness of this issue, but throughout that time more than 3,000 people have died and statistics from the Terrence Higgins Trust show that, between the start of the inquiry in July 2017 and February 2022, some 419 infected people have died.

I know personally how important this issue is and what it is like to have a loved one rely on a clean blood supply. My late mother suffered from sickle cell anaemia and because of that disease she required regular blood transfusions, which were vital. Without those blood transfusions, her life would have ended a lot earlier. I cannot imagine the pain and trauma experienced by families who were let down by basic failures of standards. The least they deserved was a prompt and thorough response from the Government. While we await the conclusion of the report and inquiry, one person dies every four days. Every day that we delay the compensation is justice denied to those people. The Minister owes it to those victims to provide real answers today.

In a recent Westminster Hall debate, the Minister's colleague, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), gave a frankly insulting response on the subject. He dodged the question and failed to give any certainty about the timeline for payment or the publication of the Government's response to the report, which they have had for more than eight months. Victims will not accept empty gestures. It seems to families that the plan changes with every announcement.

Can the Minister make a promise to the House today to publish a timetable for the compensation framework for those affected by the infected blood scandal? What

plans does he have to work in partnership with the infected blood community to develop the compensation framework for those affected? When will he end the Government's silence on the other 18 recommendations that have gone ignored? How will the Minister make sure that everyone who wants to respond to the proposals has the opportunity to do so? Rather than sporadic updates without any substance, will the Minister commit to more regular updates on progress and the direction of travel on this heartbreaking issue, ahead of the report next summer?

The contaminated blood scandal had a life-changing impact on tens of thousands of victims who were promised the hope of effective treatment. It can only be right that they see the justice they deserve as soon as possible.

Jeremy Quin: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks. She spoke movingly of the impact on those infected and affected. I concur that time is of the essence. I appreciate that, for family reasons, she knows how difficult it must be for the people who saw these things happening to their relatives, and how awful that process has been. I also appreciate that it is incredibly important, given all that has happened to this community, that trust is built and retained. I certainly commit that we will update the House regularly.

I cannot commit to a timetable. The reason is that I do not want to say anything in this House that we cannot meet. There is a complex series of steps to be taken and work to be done across Government and with the devolved Administrations. But I assure hon. Members that it is my intention to update the House as we make progress. We must do so in order to ensure that those infected and affected are fully apprised of the progress we are making.

I am grateful to Sir Robert and Sir Brian for how they have incorporated the views of those infected and affected in their work. My impression is that those infected and affected have appreciated the engagement they have had through the work undertaken. I hope that means that Sir Brian's work is fully reflective of the thoughts of the community. I have said that I wish to meet members of the community. I want to ensure that our work is timely and ready to fully consider and respond to the work that Sir Brian produces during the course of next year.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I welcome the Minister coming to make an oral statement. We know that both he and the Leader of the House have been deeply involved in this issue over the months and years.

The right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) is the most powerful advocate trying to hold Government to account and to get them to come forward. I think she will want to write—and I will happily join her—a whole series of detailed questions to the Minister, some of which he may be able to answer now. For others, he may have to say what conditions need to be met for them to be answered.

One important thing to my mind is allowing those who are not yet registered as possibly entitled to compensation to preregister, so that, when the Government come out with their response to Sir Brain Langstaff's

report, they will be able to take that up fast and make up any missing medical records, which will be a problem for some people who have been infected or affected.

The all-party parliamentary group welcomed the Government accepting the first point of Sir Robert Francis's report about the moral case. I thank the Government for that. We are also grateful that Sir Robert is going to be invited to help Sue Gray to take forward the work she is doing. We should not underestimate the amount of work.

As and when people get compensation, are they going to be protected from the scams and so-called financial advisers who may not protect their income and use of that money? Can the Minister consider whether he can answer whether inheritance tax will not be applied to someone's payments if the household is within the inheritance tax limit?

Jeremy Quin: I should have said this in response to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) but, in response to the Father of the House, I have greatly appreciated spending time with him and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), who has been a tireless campaigner on this, as has the entire all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood. I very much appreciated the time they spent with me.

I absolutely recognise the point on preregistration, which is one of the issues at the forefront of our minds as we go through this. The Father of the House recognises that there are particular issues, including in relation to medical records that may have been lost over time, dating back decades. There needs to be a clear system so that people know how to take advantage of the scheme.

On compensation and scams, I share my hon. Friend's concern. I am not certain how we will be able to address that. It is obviously an issue that afflicts many of our constituents in many circumstances, but I am sure that it will not be impossible to deliver timely advice alongside the scheme.

In terms of tax, the recommendation is clear that this should be tax free and should be disregarded for benefits. In relation to inheritance tax in particular, there are complexities that need to be examined. Whether we need to have legislation as part of that process is one of the issues that we are working on. If my hon. Friend or other hon. Members have detailed questions, they are more than welcome to write to me and I shall respond.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): We in the SNP pay tribute to those affected by the infected blood scandal—one in three infected with HIV were children—and their continued decades-long struggle for justice. Today's announcement of a swift response to Sir Robert Francis's final recommendations relating to compensation is indeed welcome, but the Minister will understand the widespread disappointment about his inability to commit today to a date for publishing a response to Sir Robert's compensation framework report.

The Minister will be aware that there is understandably a significant and remaining lack of trust between those impacted by infected blood, the UK Government and existing support schemes. Recommendation 16 of Sir Robert's study calls for an arm's length body to

"administer...compensation...with...independence of judgement and accountable directly to Parliament".

I hope the Minister will tell us today that he will keep the House updated on the progress of that.

Thousands of families across the UK have experienced great trauma after they have cared for loved ones suffering—or in many cases dying—due to contaminated blood. Does the Minister support the notion of the interim scheme being extended to families and carers who have cared for people with infected blood?

Jeremy Quin: There are two points in particular. On the arm's length body, a persuasive case is made in recommendation 16. Looking at the principles of that, particularly on independence, we are not yet ready to commit to an ALB, but we definitely want to have a body that will have the trust and respect of those whom we are seeking to support. Work is going on as to how that will best be constituted, but recognition of independence is key behind the principles of the recommendation of an ALB. I look forward to updating the hon. Lady on other issues as the work progresses.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his statement. Victims of the scandal are clearly cared for by carers and by their families. I welcome the fact that the interim payments are exempt from tax and disregarded for benefits. Has he assessed what the impact has been on families? What should any victim, or the families of victims, do if they have not been disregarded for benefits or for tax purposes? Can he provide assistance on that to ensure that families receive the full compensation?

Jeremy Quin: People absolutely should have received those payments, which should have been disregarded. If there are any issues, they should be taken up with the relevant support schemes. I would like to hear from hon. Members if they hear of such instances and I will happily take them up on behalf of their constituents.

My hon. Friend mentioned carers, as did the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). Again, a strong recommendation is made in the report. It is an area of deep complexity, as the House will recognise, so it may have to wait for Sir Brian Langstaff's specific recommendations, but we absolutely are thinking through the implications.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The disappointment is absolutely tangible. Time after time, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), the Father of the House and many other colleagues have asked about the Government response to the report, which was published eight months ago. That it is being kicked into the grass until next summer is deeply disappointing.

Will the Minister confirm that the compensation scheme will include children who lost parents—often both parents, as the person who was infected was not told and so infected their partner—as well as the parents of the 300-plus children who died of AIDS, and that they will receive payments? Will he elaborate on the preparations being made and reassure us that they include IT systems, secondment and recruitment of staff, training of staff and, most importantly, the identification of all of those who may be entitled to payments, especially given the stigma that still surrounds contaminated blood?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Lady makes a series of excellent points. I want to assure her on one point: as shown by the fact that I am here today, we want to talk about this. We want to make certain that we are making progress, and I wanted to update the House on the progress being made. I will continue to do so. I hope that reassures her about how seriously we take these matters.

It was always the intention, with the study under Sir Robert, that there would be help to prepare us to be ready for Sir Brian's report, and that remains the case. Both Sir Robert and Sir Brian are absolutely clear about the moral case for compensation of children affected by the loss of parents. How that is arranged is deeply complex, as Sir Robert said himself, so Sir Brian Langstaff had to do specific work on that. However, I totally accept the case being made on behalf of those children. I also accept that, whatever the precise mechanism, there is a huge amount of work to ensure that the scheme is up and running as swiftly as possible, from the recruitment of those running it through to IT systems, staff and the like, given the complexity of what they will be confronted with.

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con): Will the Minister please clarify whether all of those eligible for interim compensation received their payments on time?

Jeremy Quin: I believe that that is absolutely the case, and I am pleased to reassure my hon. Friend on that. It is also the case that, under the recommendations, there is still room for people to apply, if they have not applied to date. They should be looked after between now and a new scheme coming forward at a future point.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): One of my constituents has been deeply affected by this issue. She has endured, in her words,

"a long, upsetting and depressing process."

The strain on her and her family has been enormous.

The Hepatitis C Trust has warned that people affected by the infected blood scandal are falling through the gaps in the present frameworks for financial assistance and compensation, including those whose medical records have been lost and destroyed, which the Minister touched on—I would like him to expand on that—and people who were born abroad. What assessment have the Government made of the number of people who fit into that category, or when can we expect to receive such an assessment? What will he do to put things right?

Jeremy Quin: First, I absolutely sympathise with the hon. Lady's constituent. However, I hope that, since 2017, with the statutory inquiry, the report and the payment of interim compensation, they have seen that we have got a direction of travel and that things are moving in the right direction. I know, given the weight of people's loss, that that has taken too long, but we are working on it.

I recognise that there are issues in regard to hepatitis C and in particular hepatitis B. In relation to hep B, Sir Robert said that Sir Brian needed to take further medical evidence. It is one of the areas where, because of the absolute complexity, we may need to wait for the Langstaff report before we can be specific, but are we aware of the issues? Yes, we are, and I am grateful that the hon. Lady has brought the matter to the House's attention.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I pay tribute to my constituent who lost her beloved husband to this scandal and who recently wrote to me about the sort of disinformation that often is out there about this scandal, sometimes even from official sources. The Minister said that

"time is of the essence".

Does he understand why, to many of the victims, it does not feel that way? Can he at least tell the House when he would expect this matter to be finally resolved, even if that is not immediately an exact date? They need some understanding that closure will come and that they will be compensated appropriately in a timely fashion.

Jeremy Quin: The direct answer is that finality will come only after Sir Brian has reported. That is expected during the course of next year, with the work to be completed by the end of next year. I know that seems an awfully long time to wait. Our job as a Government is to make certain we are ready to respond to those recommendations. That was why my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), now the Leader of the House, commissioned Sir Robert's report, and the onus is on us to make certain that we can act swiftly and effectively on the recommendations made.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Sir Brian's report will be published next year. Rather than the Minister simply saying that the recommendations will be acted upon, can he give a firm commitment that the recommendations will be accepted and implemented?

Jeremy Quin: That is a sincerely asked question, and I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's sincerity. I trust that he will understand my sincerity when I say that I am not in a position to give a *carte blanche* acceptance. He appreciates that no Minister can do that on behalf of the Government for a report they have not yet seen. Have we accepted the moral case for compensation? We have. Have we paid interim compensation? We have. Are we keen to make certain we are in a position to respond effectively when the report is published? Absolutely, we will aim to do exactly that.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): I echo the calls from my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) that a way should be found to extend compensation payments to carers. That is particularly important to a constituent I have heard from. Can the Minister also say a bit more about exactly when and how he will engage with the devolved Administrations and also with survivors' and families' groups to ensure they are kept informed and consulted throughout this process?

Jeremy Quin: First, I pay tribute to Sir Brian and Sir Robert for the work they have done to ensure that they are speaking to those affected in the communities, and I would like to personally speak to those members of the communities as well, as we progress our work. Contact is already ongoing with the devolved Administrations. We all had to work together on the interim compensation scheme, and it is critical that we do work together. This is a UK-wide issue, and I am sure we will be able to work collaboratively to ensure we get the right answers for those who have been infected and affected.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I thank the Paymaster General for his statement. I know he is committed to this issue and will bring his personal commitment to ensuring it is resolved as soon as possible.

One of my constituents lost four family members: her brother, sister-in-law, aunt and cousin. Her 10-year-old nephew was orphaned and left to be brought up by her mother on a state pension. They have received not a penny. I appreciate the complexities in working out the timetable, but he is now in his late 30s, and we cannot imagine the trauma he has gone through with losing his parents and the stigma of their deaths. He cannot wait any longer. These people need support and compensation now. If the Minister could come back in the new year with a timetable for next year—not necessarily a detailed one—that would be helpful.

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Lady spoke for so many people in the House when she talked through that specific heart-rending example. Given the circumstances she refers to, it is no wonder that Sir Robert and Sir Brian have made clear their view on the moral case. I absolutely recognise what she would like me to do, which is to present a timetable. I will do my utmost in the new year to set out the steps we will be taking. I do not want to commit to anything we are not going to meet, and the hon. Lady will appreciate that. She recognises the complexity, but I want to reassure people that the work is under way to ensure that we are ready for the Langstaff report.

Stephen Kinnoch (Aberavon) (Lab): My constituent David Farrugia is part of what is called the fatherless generation. The scandal and the length of time it has taken to address these issues have had a profound effect on his mental health, as I am sure the Minister can imagine. Does he agree there is a clear and compelling moral case for compensation for the children of victims, which they are not currently eligible for? If he agrees that there is a clear and compelling moral case, can he set out when the compensation will be forthcoming?

Jeremy Quin: The moral case for compensation for children was specifically referred to by Sir Robert and Sir Brian. The interim compensation payments were arranged in the way recommended by Sir Brian—we accepted that recommendation in full. They were, among other things, to be as swift as possible—that defined the terms of those payments, but that does not mean that

children are being ignored in this process. The moral case was set out in the report, and we as a Government accepted a moral case for compensation to be paid.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The stigma that is sadly still attached to diseases associated with contaminated blood makes it hard for victims to come forward. What are the Government doing to tackle that stigma and ensure that every victim of contaminated blood is found and receives support? May I take this opportunity to ask for reassurance that every victim across the United Kingdom and the devolved Administrations is found and given that support?

Jeremy Quin: I absolutely recognise what the hon. Lady says. One of the most distressing things with this brief—it was only really when I got this brief that I worked through the implications—was the stigma and the fact that this was happening in an era when people were not enlightened on AIDS and HIV. The consequences for families were extraordinary, and I fear, as she does, that that stigma can still be retained today. She makes the point that this scheme must be not only as easy and as easy to access as possible, but well publicised, and people should be invited to be part of it. That must be part of the final approach. All those who have a case should be given support to be part of the scheme and receive the compensation that will be outlined.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is clear from Members who have spoken that there is a sense of urgency. I perceive from the Minister's responses that he grasps that urgency, and I thank him for that. Can he confirm that the route to compensation in the devolved nation of Northern Ireland in particular, but also in Scotland, Wales and England, will be straightforward and not a quagmire in which people seek professional and costly advice that eats into compensation and adds stress to the process for them?

Jeremy Quin: I absolutely want to give that reassurance to the hon. Gentleman. Sir Robert looked at a number of alternatives. There is a scheme operating in the Irish Republic that is a more of a common-law approach. His recommendation is that we must do something that is simpler and easier to access. After all the suffering that has taken place, we do not want to layer on to that the complexities of having to seek expensive advice to be part of a scheme. We absolutely want to do something that is simple and easily accessible so that we can ensure that everybody who is owed compensation is in a position to secure it.

Afghanistan: Independent Inquiry

12.29 pm

The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): I will make a statement on an independent inquiry related to Afghanistan. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has commissioned an independent statutory inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005 to investigate and report on alleged unlawful activity by British armed forces during deliberate detention operations in Afghanistan in the period from mid-2010 to mid-2013, and the adequacy of subsequent investigations into such allegations.

The decision has been informed by two ongoing judicial review cases known as Saifullah and Noorzai. The claimants in those cases assert that relevant allegations of unlawful activity were not properly investigated. The underlying events have been the subject of comprehensive service police criminal investigations, but the Ministry of Defence accepts that Operation Northmoor should have started earlier and that there may be further lessons to learn from the incidents, despite there being insufficient evidence for any prosecutions.

My right hon. Friend has asked the right hon. Lord Justice Haddon-Cave to chair the inquiry, and Lord Justice Haddon-Cave has stepped down from his role as senior presiding judge for England and Wales to focus on this task. He has valuable experience: he chaired the Nimrod review into the loss of RAF Nimrod MR2 aircraft XV230 in Afghanistan in 2006 and served as the judge in charge of the terrorism list between 2017 and 2018.

A copy of the terms of reference for this inquiry will be placed in the Library of the House. The inquiry will start work in earnest in early 2023 and will be fully resourced and supported so that it can carry out its work and report expeditiously. The Saifullah and Noorzai claimants have been consulted on the terms of reference but I will not comment further on ongoing court proceedings.

The UK's armed forces rightly hold themselves to the highest possible operational standards. Operations must be conducted within the clear boundaries of the law and credible allegations against our forces must always be investigated thoroughly. The service justice system is capable of investigating and prosecuting all criminal offences on operations overseas and here in the UK. Defence has worked hard over recent years to ensure that the processes in place to maintain justice in the armed forces are effective, and that allegations of criminal wrongdoing arising from any future operations are raised and investigated appropriately.

It was a manifesto commitment of the Government to tackle the vexatious legal claims that have targeted our armed forces over recent years, but the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act 2021 was always designed to permit the investigation and follow-up of any serious allegations irrespective of time passed. We will of course ensure that all service personnel, veterans, and current and former civil servants who are asked to engage with the inquiry are given full legal and pastoral support.

I hope that the whole House shares my pride in our armed forces. They are renowned throughout the world for their courage, integrity and professionalism. We are profoundly grateful for their service today, as we were while they were deployed at our behest in Afghanistan.

12.33 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement and the terms of reference for Lord Justice Haddon-Cave. We welcome the special inquiry, the Minister's confirmation that its work will start early in 2023 and his commitment to provide full legal and pastoral support. We recognise the bravery of all those who served in Afghanistan and the dangers we asked them to face—none more than our special forces, who carry out the most extraordinary missions with extreme risks to defend us and our allies.

Our British armed forces have a proud tradition of upholding the highest standards of military ethics, professionalism and international law. That is fundamental to a disciplined military force and to Britain's standing and moral authority as one of the world's leading democracies, so allegations of unlawful killings and cover-ups could not be more serious. This inquiry is essential to protect the reputation of our British special forces, to guarantee the integrity of military investigations, and to secure justice for those affected. The question is: will it do the job? Is it set up to succeed? Is the MOD—military, civilian and political—fully committed to making it succeed? Too often, it responds with denial and delay.

Over the last five years, Defence Secretaries have had three reports with more than 148 recommendations on how to fix failings in military investigations, yet one essential recommendation—the Defence serious crime unit—was launched only last week. When confronted with the BBC "Panorama" reports about these allegations in July, the MOD immediately dismissed them as "irresponsible, incorrect" and jumping to "unjustified conclusions". When pushed by all parties, as well as senior ex-military figures, journalists and the judiciary, the Defence Secretary signalled this independent inquiry two weeks later.

On the terms of reference, can the Minister confirm that the inquiry will investigate to substantiate any allegations, not just investigate how the allegations were handled? Will the inquiry cover the full chain of command—military, civil service and ministerial? How can the inquiry's independence be assured when it is housed within the MOD? On the declaration that the Secretary of State expects maximum co-operation from MOD personnel, will the head of the Army issue a similar statement or command to forces personnel?

The Minister knows but does not mention that similar allegations were made from the same period against Australian special forces in Afghanistan. They were investigated thoroughly via a special inquiry commissioned not by Ministers, but by the head of the Australian army, because getting to the truth should matter most to military leaders. Has the Minister or any other Defence Minister met Justice Brereton to understand his inquiry? If not, why not? If so, why are key features of his successful inquiry missing from this one?

In the Brereton inquiry, the judge had senior military not just judicial experience; he had legal immunities to get beyond the culture of silence; and he had legal powers to require documents and summon witnesses. If Judge Haddon-Cave considers that changes to his powers or terms of reference are required during the inquiry, will Ministers agree? This inquiry must succeed and we in the Opposition will do all we can to ensure that it does.

Dr Murrison: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. It is important to say that the inquiry is set up under the Inquiries Act 2005, which means that it will be a statutory inquiry under the control of Lord Justice Haddon-Cave. He will summon whichever witnesses he thinks fit and potentially compel them to give evidence under oath, as required by legislation.

The right hon. Gentleman asks whether the inquiry will involve the full chain of command, the answer to which is yes. He also asks whether the inquiry being housed in the Ministry of Defence is an issue, to which I would say no. Lord Justice Haddon-Cave requested that his team be based in the MOD so that he can have full access to IT systems, some of which are at a high level of classification. However, it is important that only he has access to the accommodation that has been set aside for this purpose, to maintain the appearance and actuality of complete independence from the MOD, about which I can give the right hon. Gentleman full assurances.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about Australia. The Australian investigations made it clear that there are no British persons of interest as a result of that inquiry. It is also important to say clearly that allegations made to a television production company are not the same as allegations made in court or, indeed, to a statutory inquiry. In the light of the “Panorama” report to which the right hon. Gentleman referred, service police, as I understand it, have contacted the BBC to ask for evidence. I am not aware of any new evidence having been provided beyond that which has already been investigated.

It is important to underscore the fact that Lord Justice Haddon-Cave has been selected by the Lord Chief Justice because he is the most senior of judicial figures. With that, of course, comes the full knowledge and understanding that he is acting independently. I have no doubt that he will go wherever the evidence takes him, and that is the reason that such a senior figure has been appointed to this extremely important task.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for updating the House on this inquiry. Obviously, the overseas operations Act helped to break the cycle of investigating soldiers for historic claims, but it maintained the position that, where there is compelling evidence against individuals, action can be taken. Will he therefore update the House on what will be taken forward from this inquiry and what the implications are for the Act?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. He will be aware that the overseas operations Act was designed to raise the hurdle, in the sense that it was a commitment that we all made—those of us who stood on the Conservative manifesto—to deal with the repetitive, vexatious claims being made against our armed forces, which were causing them significant difficulty. These people have served our country well; we owe them a duty of gratitude and we need to ensure that they are not the target of repetitive, vexatious claims by money-grubbing lawyers—that is the basis of this.

None of the members of the armed forces whom I know want to see their reputation dragged through the mire. It is hardly surprising that people in Ukraine look to the UK at this time for training and for support in the situation in which they find themselves. They know

full well that the UK upholds the moral component of warfare like no other. That licence, as it were, comes with a price, and that price is ensuring that, when credible and serious allegations are made, we investigate them.

Nothing in the overseas operations Act will prevent serious allegations from being investigated, regardless of timeline, but my hon. Friend will be aware that those have to be serious allegations, and they cannot be repetitive. That is the security that we have given members of our armed forces and veterans, who were previously the butt of repetitive, vexatious legal disputes. I hope that gives my hon. Friend the reassurance he seeks.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of the statement. I declare a personal interest, given that my brother served two tours of duty in Afghanistan, but not in the special forces.

I welcome the fact that the Minister said there is a credible requirement for the investigation. Although SNP Members might not agree with the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) about the overseas operations Act, I am glad the Minister, the Department and the Secretary of State for Defence at least believe that this inquiry needs to take place. However, I have a bit of a concern, which I am sure the Minister will seek to clarify. As a former member of the Defence Committee, and having sat on the previous Armed Forces Bill Committee, both of which, critically, discussed the treatment of women in the armed forces, I know there is grave concern that, when there is any type of investigation—especially if it is credible—the justice system does not view it properly.

I therefore seek reassurances from the Minister that the right hon. Lord Justice Haddon-Cave recognises the complexity of the case and understands the lived experience not only of those making the accusations, but—the Minister is probably right about this—those in the armed forces as well. Lord Justice Haddon-Cave must understand the overall complexity of the issues being investigated and take on board the entirety of them in any conclusions, because previous investigations—notably around the treatment of women in the armed forces—give me grave cause for concern.

I also want to put on record my commitment and that of my party to members of the armed forces, who play their role and put their lives on the line daily. On a personal note, I recognised that when my brother served two tours of duty in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. He and his comrades in arms put their best foot forward and did the duty they were asked to, but even they recognise that, sometimes, people make mistakes. If mistakes have been made, they need to be properly investigated, and the full weight of the law needs to be brought to bear.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I pay tribute to his brother for his service. Justice Haddon-Cave is no ordinary judge; he is one of the most senior members of our judiciary, and he has been selected by the Lord Chief Justice for this task because of that. It therefore follows that he is perfectly capable of appreciating the complexity of this issue. I hope that that gives the hon. Gentleman the reassurance he seeks.

[Dr Murrison]

As for the further conduct of the inquiry, that will now be a matter for Lord Justice Haddon-Cave; it certainly will not be a matter for me. I underscore that this is an independent inquiry, and it would be entirely improper for me, from this point, to comment further on its conduct. As I understand it, Lord Justice Haddon-Cave intends to issue a statement of his own shortly.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This Minister, of all Ministers, will be aware that our armed forces veterans are acutely depressed and angry about the fact that their political masters sent them into this impossible war, where they faced an enemy who was utterly merciless, who had no regard to any conventions—Geneva or otherwise—and who was unspeakably cruel. Of course, the Taliban Government will never have any such inquiry into their own forces. I know that we have the overseas operations Act, and the Minister rightly said that it creates a presumption against vexatious claims, but I would like to tease out from him how the inquiry will have a carefully calibrated investigation, and also that the bar for prosecutions will indeed be high. Otherwise, we will inflict a severe blow on the morale of the veterans of our brave armed forces. None of them wanted to go to Afghanistan—we put them there.

Dr Murrison: I very much appreciate my right hon. Friend's point. We have focused on individuals in the questioning so far, and I would like to point out that our principal concern is elucidating any systemic factors that have not been investigated fully as a result of the investigations we have had up to this point.

In particular, I would expect Lord Justice Haddon-Cave to be mindful of ensuring that we are compliant with our obligations under article 2 specifically, and articles 2 and 3 more generally, as we are required to be under our treaty obligations, and to learn things more generally about what went on that may help us to improve what we do. That is the reason for the investigation. It most certainly is not to pillory individuals or to seek to repeat the service investigations by the service police that have already been done, which have been externally and independently validated, if that brings any comfort to my right hon. Friend.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): May I declare an interest as a former company commander with the special forces support group who served in Afghanistan? As such, I know that the overwhelming number of people who serve in our armed forces, and particularly in the UKSF, do so with huge distinction and extraordinary courage. As the Minister said, we can be very proud of their service. They rightly aspire to maintain the very highest of professional standards and adherence to the rule of law. After all, it is that which differentiates us from our opponents. As the Minister said, it is therefore necessary that, when serious allegations are made, they are investigated, but that needs to be done thoroughly and independently, so I welcome the statement that the Minister has made today.

Clearly, none of us would want to prejudge the inquiry, but, looking slightly to the longer term, has the Minister or the Department given any consideration to the potential merits of tasking the Intelligence and Security Committee to provide oversight of UKSF?

Dr Murrison: I rise again with a sense of trepidation, Madam Deputy Speaker, acknowledging the hon. Gentleman's service in Afghanistan. The point that he has made has been made before. I think it was made when we covered some of this ground back in July. He will know the way that this part of our armed forces operates and the difficulties and constraints under which they operate. We are going through this process now with a statutory inquiry. That is a big deal. I expect Lord Justice Haddon-Cave to go everywhere he needs to go to discover the truth and make public all of it—so far as he can within the constrictions of national security.

With all due respect, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman on having a further mechanism of auditing the operations of parts of our armed forces. It is probably right that we assure ourselves that all parts of our armed forces operate within the rule of law and that their rules of engagement are legal. He will be aware of the extraordinary lengths that defence takes, particularly now and in recent years, to ensure that everything it does is lawful. Personally, I am comfortable with that; I am confident that we do that. Although I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's suggestion—we keep everything under consideration, and it will be interesting to see what Lord Justice Haddon-Cave comes up with—I am not minded, at this point in time, to accept it.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Similar allegations against Australian special forces were investigated fully by an independent judge-led inquiry, backed by welfare support for troops and their families, to get the truth. The Minister has spoken of legal and pastoral support, but can he explain whether the UK inquiry will provide similar or better welfare support, and can he give us those reassurances today?

Dr Murrison: I think I can. As I speak, we are contacting those who may be affected by today's statement to give them details of the support that is available to them. Anybody who is asked to be a witness in this inquiry will be contacted by the Ministry of Defence to explain what is available. To be clear, people who are requested to appear before Lord Justice Haddon-Cave will be provided with the legal and pastoral support that they need to get them through this. It is appropriate to put it on record that this statement will cause a lot of dismay and anxiety among those individuals who have served this country with great distinction. We understand that and I give the hon. Lady a commitment that we will do all in our power to make sure that we stand with them and give them the support that is required.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Can the Minister say whether any current or former members of the armed forces have been disciplined in relation to the special forces raid in Shesh Aba in August 2012 reported by the BBC?

Dr Murrison: I will not get into that. Lord Justice Haddon-Cave will investigate the matter fully and report in due course.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Just over a century ago, my father's house—my father was a child of about the same age as some of the children who were shot during some of the incidents under investigation—was raided by British auxiliaries in the west of Ireland in a

quite violent incident. I shall never forget that my grandmother, relating that story to me as a child, was eternally grateful to the British Army officer who intervened and stopped violence being perpetrated. It has always struck me that culture and leadership within our armed forces is key to our standing and reputation in the world. Does the Minister agree that principal among the outcomes from this inquiry should be clear co-operation from the leadership of our armed forces in making sure that it gets to the truth?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman has hit the nail on the head. There is that commitment right at the very top of our armed forces that we should get this right and that we should learn any lessons that need to be learned. I can give him that commitment. I entirely understand the point that he has made and the experience that he relates.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And finally—as I have already said twice this morning—Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I do not mind being last in any debate; I am just very pleased to be given the opportunity to ask a question. The Minister, I think, has genuinely tried to answer the questions sensitively. With that in mind, will he outline the steps that are in place to offer support to any personnel under investigation, as similar proceedings that I and other Members in the Chamber are aware of in Northern Ireland have seen many innocent soldiers turning to addiction as a result of trauma and stress—I am aware of those cases personally. Will he confirm that innocent until proven guilty remains the standard for any investigation?

Dr Murrison: There are structures within the Army in particular to deal with the pastoral care of individuals who may be facing allegations. The Army operational legacy branch, for example, will be standing by to assist in this particular area. I reiterate the commitment that I gave earlier: anybody who is wrapped up in this business will be given everything that they need—legal and pastoral—to get them through this. We will stand by them. We owe them that, and I will make sure that that happens. I hope that that gives the hon. Gentleman the assurances that he needs.

Points of Order

12.58 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Slough has a low uptake of diphtheria vaccination—not enough to accomplish herd immunity—yet the Home Office has designated a Slough hotel as a place for asylum seekers with diphtheria. We have people staying for months in accommodation designated as a 48-hour reception facility. Families with young children are split across different rooms and different floors. There are safeguarding concerns, with vulnerable women and children placed alongside large numbers of single men; overcrowding issues; numerous instances of people absconding; and insufficient laundry facilities, leading to scabies infections. Our already stretched local children's services are having to find extra money from who knows where to provide clothes and school equipment for unaccompanied children. The council is getting only 24 hours' notice—if that—from the Home Office when it commandeers a new site to host asylum seekers.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in your esteemed capacity, could you please advise me on how I can finally secure a reply from the Home Secretary, on behalf of the local agencies in Slough that have written to me, to explain how Home Office Ministers intend to fix this mess and put some humanity back into the way that they are caring for the people in their care?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As I think he knows, it is not a point of order for the Chair; it does not concern order in this House. He is, however, raising a very serious matter. I appreciate it from the point of view of what happens in my constituency, and many Members of this House will appreciate the point he makes and share his concerns. His question to me is about how he can bring this matter to the attention of the appropriate Minister. There are various ways in which he can do that, and I am sure that those in the Table Office will help him if he goes to seek advice there. I am also certain that Ministers currently on the Treasury Bench will have heard what he has said and that the matter will, we hope, be conveyed to the appropriate Minister. I must also point out to him that on Tuesday we have the general debate on matters to be raised before the Adjournment and it would be perfectly proper for him to bring forward his concerns then.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Successive Speakers have agreed that Members should receive responses from Departments in a timely fashion, yet last week my office received a response from the Home Office to an inquiry made on 1 October 2021. That represents a gap of 14 months and one week. I wonder whether you agree that that is simply unacceptable and that the Government are failing in their duties to this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and, yes, I agree that that is simply unacceptable. Mr Speaker has said from the Chair on countless occasions, and those of us who echo his words have also said this on countless occasions, that it is essential that Departments should support Ministers

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

in giving answers to Members of Parliament in a timely fashion. Fourteen months is not a timely fashion. The hon. Gentleman has put his concerns on the record and the whole House agrees that it is a matter of concern.

Backbench Business

Prepayment Meters: Self-Disconnection

1.3 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House recognises that prepayment meter customers, who pay for their usage in advance, are not afforded the same rights when in energy debt as customers who pay in arrears, such as those who pay in direct debit; understands that a prepayment meter customer is automatically disconnected when they exceed just £10 of debt; acknowledges that, in contrast, those who pay in arrears are afforded time and support to resolve their debts before action is taken to disconnect; is deeply concerned that so called self-disconnection of prepayment meter customers will see the most vulnerable in our society left without heat, light and facilities to cook and wash over the coming winter; and strongly urges the Government to outlaw self-disconnection to ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable customers are not left without basic energy provision.

First, let me thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to this debate, and for understanding the urgent nature of it and, thus, offering me a pre-Christmas date. It is urgent, because something needs to be done now, even if only on a temporary basis. It is urgent enough for me to say at the outset that I am not just trying to raise awareness today; I am asking the Minister to do something about this, preferably today. Perhaps he will be unable to do so because of procedure, but I hope he will at least resolve to listen closely and act urgently.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kevin Hollinrake) *indicated assent.*

Anne McLaughlin: I see that the Minister is nodding and I thank him for that. I hope he is able to come back next week before Parliament goes into recess, before we are plunged into even colder temperatures than we are experiencing at the moment and before people start dying because they did not enjoy the same rights as the majority of people. I urge him to come back next week and tell us that he has decided to give everyone those rights and that he will do so by outlawing so-called “self-disconnection” for those on prepayment meters.

I am also calling on the energy suppliers to do the same. One of them surely will have the moral compass and backbone to lead the way and be the first to promise that nobody—none of its customers—will be subjected to self-disconnection simply because they are on a prepayment meter. I am calling on the big six, as those guys have the money—they have the billions—and they can do this. Those companies have to take responsibility, but we probably cannot wait for that and the Government need to compel them to do so.

The other thing I would like the Government to get on top of this side of Christmas is ensuring that everybody is accessing the energy bill discount of £66 a month. The consumer rights group Which? told me this morning that a reported £84 million of that money is not reaching half a million households—the ones who need it the most. That is happening for a variety of reasons. Every company has a different way to access this help, with some requiring people to go to the post office. With

others, the help arrives by post and often the recipient thinks that this is junk mail or they are afraid to open the letter. That is what happens when someone is on a low income: they get scared of the letters coming through the door, so they bury their head in the sand. I know that the Secretary of State has written to these companies about this issue, but anything more that can be done must be done urgently.

Before I come on to the substance of the debate, may I also thank the many MPs, from all parties, who signed my debate application, both those who are here today and those who sent messages of support, as I very much appreciate it? More importantly, our constituents will appreciate seeing their MPs stand up and fight for them—I hate to say it, but in some cases they are fighting for these people's lives.

I pay my gas and electricity bills by standing order. In common with those who pay by direct debit or pay when the bill comes in, I pay in arrears. Also in common with those who pay in arrears, if I stop paying my bills I can be disconnected by my energy provider but it is very much a final step—a last resort. That is not the case for those who pay by prepayment meter. Should they be unable to pay for gas or electricity, the first thing that happens is that they are disconnected from their supply. The minute they go over the £10 or, in some cases, £5 of emergency credit that is applied to each prepayment meter, their supply just stops and they are considered to have self-disconnected.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing today's debate. Does she agree that it is an absolute disgrace that people on a prepayment meter are having to pay more for their energy, particularly as they are often the people in greatest deprivation and cannot afford to do so?

Anne McLaughlin: I absolutely agree on that. I should thank the hon. Lady, because I have a ten-minute rule Bill on this matter and she spoke up for it last week in allowing it to continue in this place. I will come on to that. It is so ironic that the poorest people are paying the most. We get to pay less, yet we are paying in arrears.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an excellent beginning to her speech. Does she agree that what we see from the energy companies is the "rocket and feathers principle", where the prices skyrocket when they first come in but then they drop like feathers? The gas price has actually gone down, so why are some people paying up to £4,300 for their energy just on their gas bill when that far outstrips what one would be paying on a direct debit or other form of payment for gas?

Anne McLaughlin: Yes, I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady on that. The whole system is wrong and crazy. Let me go back to what I was saying about the people who are just disconnected for their £5 or £10 of debt. When they are disconnected, they cannot boil a kettle or heat a room. They cannot even heat an electric blanket. They cannot wash their clothes, have a shower or watch TV—they cannot even charge their phones. In some cases, which I will come on to, they can no longer operate disability aids—that is an absolute disgrace. It means that I, as a well-paid MP and someone who is

clearly able to pay their bills, could stop paying them just on a whim and, unlike someone on a meter I could then run up hundreds or perhaps thousands of pounds-worth of debt to my energy supplier before being disconnected, whereas people on prepayment meters—the ones with the least money—are limited to a debt of only £5 or £10 before they are cut off. It is that inequity that I want addressed.

I do not believe the Minister will tell me today that this situation is fair. I would be amazed if he did try to argue there was anything equitable about this treatment. So, as I have said in the past, I am hopeful, verging on confident, that the Government will support what I am calling for here. As I said at the start, the Government need to do it quickly—they need to do it now. I know how slowly things move in this place, but I also know the Government can move quickly when they need to, and I argue that they really do need to. I am desperately worried about people out there. I am worried that people are going to die—people who would have lived, had this awful practice been outlawed.

However, I want to start by talking about a very important group of people who do not fit that category, because they are not going to live for much longer regardless of the result of my campaign. I have been speaking to Marie Curie about its "Dying in poverty" campaign and have heard about the people it is supporting: people who return home after a lengthy stay in hospital or a hospice, try to top up the prepayment meter and discover that the large sum they have topped up by just is not enough.

Why is that? Because every day they were in the hospice, they racked up daily standing charges. They were not there and they did not use gas or electricity, but they have a big debt to pay off before they can even access heat or light. Worse, their daily standing charges are higher than our daily standing charges. When we consider that the average cost of an electricity bill can rise by 75% for someone who is terminally ill, it is doubly unfair. Would any of us want that situation for our own families? Of course we would not—and if it is not good enough for our families, it is not good enough for anybody's family.

I want to run through some of my main concerns about these meters. Those on prepayment meters are generally on them because they are on low income and most are given no choice. Citizens Advice described the process as follows: people have a period where they are unable to pay their bills and their energy supplier is obliged to negotiate a repayment plan that takes in to account their ability to pay for the debt and their ongoing energy consumption. Because of the higher costs, however, many people do not have enough money to cover their ongoing usage, let alone pay towards arrears. They begin to fall behind on payments and, to recover that money, the supplier gains entry to their home and installs a prepayment meter.

Rachael Maskell: I do not know whether the hon. Lady saw this article in *The Independent*, but I was completely taken aback and shocked to read that Wigan and Leigh magistrates court took a call from the energy supplier and, in just three minutes 51 seconds, determined that 496 people would have their energy supply cut off. Where is the scrutiny in that? Surely we should not be cutting anyone off at this time?

Anne McLaughlin: That is exactly what the Good Law Project is working on; I think it was featured in that article. Tens of thousands of warrants are being rubber-stamped by magistrates in minutes. The Good Law Project has asked me to ask the Minister whether the Government will consider instructing Ofgem to require energy companies to halt all new installations of prepayment meters, including remote switching of smart meters.

There is a problem of people on smart meters being switched to prepayment without the need for a warrant, because the warrant is about gaining entry to the house and, if the switch can be done remotely, there is no need to gain entry. Ofgem called those practices “unacceptable” and said it would take action if they continued. Six weeks after it said that, they are continuing, so I am keen to know what action Ofgem plans to take and when it plans to do it.

The energy companies say that the reason those on prepayment meters pay more is the cost of installing the meter. I am not sure I buy that, and in any case I do not think the cost should be passed to the customer, but, if that is the case, surely they cannot charge higher amounts to someone who has been switched remotely? Another concern is that, as has been mentioned, people on prepayment meters pay more per unit of energy and higher daily standing charges, and they pay in advance while the rest of us get to pay in arrears.

I am also concerned about the numbers: 60,000 new meters were installed across the UK in the six months to March this year, reversing a long-term trend of falling numbers. However, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy does not know how many people are being put on prepayment meters now and it cannot give me an answer to that. I think the Minister will be interested in finding that out for us.

Something else that concerns me is that, according to Citizens Advice Scotland, Scotland disproportionately bears the brunt of this situation. We have more prepayment meters per population than any part of the UK: roughly 15% of people in the UK are on them, but it is 19% of people in Scotland and in my city of Glasgow it is over 20%. Scotland is also colder, as you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker—I see you nodding in agreement. Estimates suggest that next year, while the rest of the UK will pay on average a shocking £2,500 a year per household for energy bills, in Scotland it will be £3,300 on average.

It stands to reason that Scotland will see more disconnections, because people cannot magic up an extra £800 on top of all the other increases. There is nothing the Scottish Government can do, because we are not independent and we do not have the power in Scotland to do anything about it. That is ironic, given the amount of energy Scotland produces. We produce six times more gas than we consume and 80% of electricity comes from clean energy sources. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) said yesterday, we have the energy; we just do not have the power—yet.

Energy suppliers are supposed to be obliged to consider whether somebody is vulnerable before disconnection. I would argue that everyone on a prepayment meter, especially this winter and especially in the middle of a cost of living crisis, is vulnerable, but there are definitions that the suppliers are supposed to work to. Ofgem

recently produced a report expressing a lack of confidence that they are doing so and certainly concerns that they are not doing it consistently.

Let us look at a few examples of people I would consider most vulnerable. We already know that those living with disability pay a financial premium; many of them have only ever known a cost of living crisis. The average extra cost of being disabled in the UK was £583 a month, and for the 24% of families with a disabled child, that figure was more than £1,000 a month before the cost of living crisis, so those figures will be higher now.

A report from Scope, the charity that fights every day for equality for disabled people, has shown that those with disabilities have higher energy needs in their homes and are even more exposed to the energy crisis—so exposed that 91% of those surveyed by Scope were worried that they would not be able to afford to pay their bills this winter. We often talk about choosing between heating and eating, but many of those paying a premium of well over £500 a month just to survive are now able to do neither adequately. For those on a prepayment meter that will spell disaster if we do not outlaw the practice of forced self-disconnection.

That is not always just about money. Many people with disabilities have mobility issues; I have heard of people who cannot reach their meter and have to wait for someone to help them with it, and others who have periods when they are unable to get out of the house to top up the meter.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Lady is being very generous with her time. I want to highlight people who have to use home medical devices. This could be a feeding machine, sleep apnoea machine or bilevel positive airway pressure machine—there are many devices that people have to use at home. Those people are now having to make significant choices about their health. Should they not have an additional payment? I know the Government have put in a little bit of money for disabled people, but should there not be full cost recovery for running those devices?

Anne McLaughlin: I absolutely agree with that, and for another reason too: we have an issue in the health service with bed blocking. If people are unable to run the equipment at home, they will end up in some kind of care facility, which blocks beds and increases the NHS waiting list. But yes, the moral argument is that they should absolutely have those costs covered.

Then there are people who have been homeless, who have finally moved into their new home and almost always find it has a prepayment meter. The Simon Community in Glasgow told me that many of the people it works with are simply walking the streets again in an effort to warm up because they do not have the money to get the meter working. How can that be right?

Many pensioners are on prepayment meters, and some will inevitably find themselves in the situation I have described, where they have no gas and no electricity. That is bad enough for anyone, but for a pensioner it can be disastrous. Age UK tells us that being cold even for a short period of time can be dangerous to older people. Age UK is widely respected and not given to hyperbole, so we really should listen. We cannot have our pensioners being cut off from gas and electricity because they have gone £5 or £10 over, while the rest of us have the luxury of paying our bills months in arrears.

The Children and Young People's Commissioner of Scotland is campaigning for the right of children and young people not to find themselves with no gas or electricity in their home simply because their parents use a prepayment meter. He is calling for the definition of vulnerable to be widened, so that instead of applying only to children aged up to five, it applies to those up to 18. It is hard for me to think of an argument against that, so instead I wholeheartedly support it, and I ask if the Minister would be good enough to look at that question and come back to me on it.

All I am really asking is for those on prepayment meters to be treated equally to the rest of us. The right to be treated equally is crucial, because I have heard just two arguments against my proposal: first that people could end up in debt; and secondly, that people might simply not bother to pay their bills. On the latter point, I would argue strongly that those on prepayment meters are no more likely to be morally predisposed to not bothering to pay their bills than those of us who pay by different methods. Living on a low income does not make someone any less honest than anybody else. Yes, there is a risk that stopping self-disconnection could lead to people being in debt, but I repeat what I said in my ten-minute rule Bill speech: if the rest of us, paying by different methods, are allowed to take the risk of ending up in debt, and we are trusted to find ways to resolve that without being disconnected, why not those on prepayment meters? Secondly, if anyone in the Chamber is asked to choose between debt or death for their constituent, who among us would seriously choose death? I know how dramatic that sounds, but life is dramatic. It is unpredictable at the moment, and our constituents' lives are at risk if we do not sort this.

The campaigning organisation Debt Justice wants the Government to start thinking now about what will happen to people who simply cannot pay their energy bills, and those who will rack up unpayable debts despite living frugally, and who will never be in a position to pay it off. Debt Justice wants the Government to start thinking about debt write-offs, and how that would work and who would be eligible. As I said, in order to stay alive, some people will have to run up debt. If we do not start talking about that now, some people will be so worried about that debt that they will simply switch everything off and their lives will then be endangered.

A point was raised with me by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland about the legislation that allows companies to forcibly enter people's homes and install prepayment meters in the first place, namely the Rights of Entry (Gas and Electricity Boards) Act 1954. First we were getting rid of the Human Rights Act, and then we were not, then we were again, and now I think I am right in saying we are not. We have the Human Rights Act, and we are keeping it, as we should, but the 1954 Act predates that. I would be grateful if the Minister could look into whether it is compatible with human rights legislation—I know that others are looking into that too.

We are heading for recess, and I have no objection to anyone taking a well-earned break. I know that we are not an emergency service, but we can do something now to prevent people from ending up in emergency situations. I am speaking up for everyone on prepayment meters, and I want nobody to be disconnected. I am most terrified for those whom I noted in my speech: young

people, pensioners, those who were previously homeless, people living with a disability, and those living with a terminal illness. I repeat my call to the big six energy companies: will one of them please just have the backbone to be first to say that nobody will be forced into so-called self-disconnection this winter? We can argue later about how long that should last, but will one of those companies, today, please blaze a trail for their industry?

Finally, there would be no need for me to stand here and plead with those huge companies to throw people a few crumbs from their billions in profit if the Minister simply told them that they can no longer disconnect people on prepayment meters. A moratorium, a ban, right now—I don't mind which. As long as when we head to our warm homes and our families for recess, we know that our constituents are guaranteed that their energy supply will not be cut off, leaving them in misery and their lives in peril.

1.23 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): May I say what a moving experience it was to be in the Chamber this morning for the commemoration of the holocaust?

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin). She is my constituency neighbour, and indeed my constituency MP, and she has done extremely well to secure this debate and in all her work on this important issue. I do not think there is anything wrong in principle with the concept of prepayment meters. There will always be consumers who find the ability to pay up front, instead of in arrears, helpful and convenient for a variety of different reasons. For some there will be a sense of security about their ability to budget, and to make sure that money is not spent on other things. There is perhaps a certain convenience, especially for those familiar with the technology, around digital prepayment where meters can be topped up from apps or by phone.

However, as my hon. Friend made clear, there is something fundamentally flawed about the way prepayment meter schemes work in this country, and as we have heard, the consequences are profoundly challenging. It has never been clear to me—I do not think it is clear to anyone in the Chamber—why there should be such a significant differential cost between prepayment meters and paying by direct debit. Although efforts have been made in recent years to align prices, there are still significant discrepancies. Citizens Advice has calculated that households who are moved to a prepayment meter this year alone will collectively spend £49.6 million more than they would have as direct debit customers over the coming winter. The excuses given by energy companies—that admin and infrastructure costs are higher—simply do not wash, especially with the arrival of smart meter and remote technology.

The much higher standing charge is particularly pernicious and unfair. My very limited experience of prepayment metering is relatively benign. Our campaign headquarters during the independence referendum campaign had a pay-as-you-go electric meter. In some respects that was helpful, because we did not need to worry about a bank account, and in theory we only paid for what we needed. However, on more than one occasion when we opened up the shop we found that the power was off because daily standing charges had eaten away at the credit, even though nobody had been in or used any power for several days. For us, that was a

[Patrick Grady]

minor frustration and inconvenience, but for some of the most vulnerable in society, that represents a premium charge in already difficult and often heartbreaking situations.

Marie Curie's "Dying in Poverty" report talks about situations where patients come home from hospital or a hospice to find the lights out, the heating off, or their meter in debt. People with terminal conditions, rushed perhaps at short notice to A and E, are unlikely to be thinking immediately about topping up their gas or electric meters, and if an extended stay leads to credit running down, they could return to a cold or dark property without immediate options to fix it. Marie Curie's research also shows that a terminal diagnosis can lead to a 75% increase in energy bills. I have spoken in this place before about my very close friends Mel and Tom. Mel has very late stage cancer, and she explained some of the difficulties they are facing to Marie Curie:

"I live in the Highlands of Scotland, which is a colder climate and as soon as my bones get cold, they hurt. It's very painful. We have to keep the house warm, but with the energy prices going up, we can't do that."

For customers like Mel and Tom who are on prepayment meters, the costs are already higher than they are for other customers. They already face high costs compared with those who can pay by direct debit, and those costs are rising as a result of overall market increases in prices. Overall usage is going up because of the particularly cold snap, and then usage is increasing again because keeping the house warm is literally a medical requirement. I think that counts as a quintuple-whammy, and it is all down to factors outwith their control. The Government and the Minister should listen to Marie Curie's calls for all terminally ill people, regardless of age, to be eligible for support from the winter fuel payment and the warm home discount scheme.

Anne McLaughlin: My hon. Friend directed me to the story of the couple he mentioned. One of the most moving things to read was that, on top of needing to keep everything warm, all Mel wants to do is provide memories for her little boy—positive, happy family memories. She said that she cannot even begin to do that because she is too busy trying to keep on top of the energy bills. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is one of the hardest things for any parent to bear?

Patrick Grady: Yes, absolutely, and I recommend that everyone in the House reads that report, and not just that testimony, but testimonies from other people across the country. The point Mel made is that they are not unique. That situation is repeated up and down the country, and all of us will have such cases in our inbox. My hon. Friend mentioned Scope's research, which found that 50% of disabled people who are on prepayment meters say they are forced to ration energy usage so that they do not lose supply, 26% are going off supply in order to save money, and 14% went off supply because they were not physically able to top up their meters due to their impairment. That is disgraceful behaviour on the part of energy companies—cutting people off because they physically cannot access their prepayment meters. Citizens Advice has documented similar cases. The increasing practice among energy companies of using smart meter technology to force people on to prepayment

meters is particularly concerning, especially when they are using it as a means of avoiding the requirement for a warrant to enter people's homes.

I echo Citizens Advice's call for a moratorium on all forced switches to prepayment meters until at least April 2023. That chimes with the calls in my hon. Friend's motion, in her ten-minute rule Bill and in other ten-minute rule Bills and motions that have been brought before the House. The Government have been using sitting Fridays in this Session to put a lot of very worthy legislation through the House, so there is no reason why they could not find a way to prioritise my hon. Friend's Bill and offer some security to those who face fuel poverty or disconnection this winter.

The Government must work with and, if necessary, proactively regulate the energy companies to ensure that prices are aligned. Nobody should pay a premium just because of the type of meter or payment method they use, and especially not those who can least afford it.

Rachael Maskell: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government really need to talk to directors of public health? We are seeing a real spike in respiratory syncytial virus among children and babies, and in community-acquired pneumonia and flu. People in cold conditions are often the most susceptible to illness. To prevent a further crisis in the NHS, it is therefore really important that preventive measures be put in place so that people are not cold and living in damp housing.

Patrick Grady: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The case studies that we have highlighted show that this is a health issue: it is about people's health and wellbeing. It is not about some sort of privilege or nice thing to have.

If people's body temperature is not allowed to remain stable and they are not kept warm, the costs will ultimately be passed on to the NHS. Like a lot of interventions and preventive measures, this is going to have to be paid for somehow, so it should be paid for in a way that keeps people well, comfortable and cared for in their own home. Otherwise, the costs will be passed on via the interventions that come through the NHS. The energy companies need to realise that and step up their response. They are getting money up front from prepaying customers, and presumably they earn interest on money going into their bank account before the energy has been consumed, so you would think it would be in their interest to make prices fair across the board.

If the Government will not regulate the energy companies and the prices that people have to pay, they should devolve the powers so that Scotland's Parliament can step up and step in. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East says, we are talking about energy-rich Scotland, where people living in fuel poverty look out their windows and see cheap, renewable, clean wind turbines on the horizon—energy-rich Scotland, where the average energy costs are higher than in the other parts of the UK and the use of prepayment meters is disproportionately higher. Energy-rich Scotland, as we all like to say on the SNP Benches, has the energy but does not yet have the power. As with so many issues, if the UK Government will not act, people in Scotland will ultimately decide to take power into their own hands through independence.

1.32 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) and others who have contributed to the debate. I agree entirely with their comments and sentiments. I want to comment on two aspects: “self-disconnection” and prepayment meters.

I am a child of the '60s. Families of that era will all remember, because they were universal, the strictures to switch off lights and the directions to ensure that every appliance was switched off unless, like a fridge, it required to remain on. “Self-disconnection” was just never mentioned; that has arisen only in the energy crisis. Let us be clear: it is a euphemism that masks something that is frankly quite appalling.

We have had other such euphemisms. The phrase “legitimate targets” has been used when civilians, civil servants, part-time police officers—usually farmers doing it in their spare time—or even customs officers have been murdered by terrorists. Describing them as “legitimate targets” takes away the horror of it. We see it even from Governments: we have had illegal wars with “collateral damage”. No, sorry: it was not collateral damage. It was the murder of families going to prayer, to a wedding or wherever else.

Now we have “self-disconnection”. It sounds very benign: who could possibly disagree with self-disconnection? Where is the harm in self-disconnection, if somebody chooses to manage their budget in that way? What we are really talking about when we use the phraseology of “self-disconnection” is the financial circumstances imposed on people by the cost of living crisis and the energy price rises, which are all within the control and the domain of a Government who are causing hardship—albeit that people are doing it themselves because they have literally no alternative. We have to move on from “self-disconnection”. This is a Government choice that has to be changed and has to be addressed.

Let me move on to prepayment meters. The cold snap that we are living through is affecting everybody. There will not be anybody who possesses a smart meter who will not be looking at it with some surprise. Many will be looking with horror, and some with abject misery, at just what their bill shows as the meter rises before their very eyes.

Let us be clear. It is not simply a question of heating, which is fundamental during the cold snap at the moment, nor is it simply about the question that is always posed about the insidious choice that people have between heating and eating. It is also about access to power. If someone is on electricity and they have to self-disconnect, as the euphemism has it, that will also affect their ability to have the fridge on. Maintaining a fridge allows people to buy food more cheaply and keep it for longer, which affects quality of life. People who want to wash their clothes—the person going to their employment who wants to look smart, the mother who wants to ensure that her children are not picked on at school—are not able to turn on their washing machine, because anybody with a smart meter knows how fast it ratchets up when they put the washing machine on.

It goes beyond even that. Access to power provides people with access to a phone or an iPad to allow their child to improve themselves. People require access to a phone to obtain employment; on some occasions, perversely,

they may even require it to top up their prepayment meter. If they cannot even get access to a phone, how can they deal with that?

As other hon. Members have mentioned, access to power also fundamentally affects life. There are people who require power for their health. The fundamental concern is dialysis: the numbers are few, but there should be no basis on which anybody with a health requirement should be required to have a prepayment meter. I know that word has been put about that that is not normally what happens, but we all know from the charities that it does. That has to change.

What are the numbers that we are dealing with? We are not talking about a handful of individuals. In Scotland, there are 500,000 prepayment meters, which equates to almost a fifth of our people. The proportion is slightly less in the United Kingdom as a whole: it is 4 million there. We are not talking about the odd person in the odd street. We are talking about whole areas that are certainly in multiple deprivation and are being forced into this. That has to be dealt with.

Smart meters should be liberated. Technology is meant to advance our society. In many instances, it has done so; access to the internet has been beneficial, even though social media has a downside, as we all know. But 13% of smart meters are now on a prepayment tariff. That is simply unacceptable: it is bringing in a wrong, and it is perpetuating a wrong. Technology that should simplify the system and make it fairer is making it worse. No smart meter should be going on to a prepayment tariff.

I agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) that the issue is not prepayment meters per se, but the higher standing charges and higher tariff that apply. An argument could be made that there is a need for prepayment meters. Private landlords really do want them, and I can understand that in those circumstances they are acceptable. Some public landlords would also prefer them; that, in itself, is not an issue. Some people would even prefer them so that they can manage their own budget; I might advise or counsel them against that, but it is an option that they should be able to take if they so wish, after hearing such advice. What is entirely unacceptable is the higher standing charges and higher tariff that apply. It is simply perverse that those who have least and are most vulnerable, which invariably includes people on prepayment meters, should pay more. That must end.

I have spoken to the major utility companies. Previously, with prepayment meters, they used to bung everything to Utilita, but now that we are moving on to smart meters it is all going much wider across the board. The companies accept that it would be perfectly reasonable and easily possible, with the technology we have, to change everybody to the same tariff. This is a separate issue for another day, but actually we should have a social tariff of the kind that applies in much of Europe and should apply to the poorest and most vulnerable here. There certainly should be no increased tariff for those with prepayment meters. It can be done with the current technology. At most, it would mean a very modest increase for the rest of us on credit. That is the maximum issue that would be faced by the companies that provide it. If that has to be, so be it. I am my brother's keeper as we come to the festive period. We have a taxation system in which those who have most pay most, and if it means a very minor increase for those

[Kenny MacAskill]

on credit, so be it. There are other ways that we can remedy it, such as through windfall taxes. That is what has to be done.

This euphemism of “self-disconnection” has to be killed once and for all. That is not a phrase we should accept. It is enforced austerity, poverty, misery and sometimes even death. We have to ensure that higher standing charges and higher tariffs are ended for those on prepayment meters. It can be done—it is within the scope of Ofgem. I have asked Ofgem, and it says that it is a creature of statute; it can only act on the basis of a ministerial direction. How do we end the scandal of a higher standing charge and a higher prepayment tariff? The Minister writes a letter now to Ofgem and says, “Change it.” Ofgem would then invoke it, and this would be solved. I urge the Minister to do that.

1.40 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow the passionate speech by the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill), and I could not agree with him more. Despite our constituencies being so different, there are a lot of similarities, because in Hornsey and Wood Green, we have far too many people who are doing it tough this winter and are stuck on these dreadful prepayment meters, where the standing charges seem to change overnight without any advice and the tariffs are particularly high. Members across the House have emphasised the social inequity of this situation.

I pay tribute to the chief executive of the citizens advice bureau in my constituency, Mr Daniel Blake, and all his volunteers, who do an enormously positive job to help people in their hour of need. I pay tribute to my constituency caseworkers and all those throughout the House who work tirelessly day and night to assist our constituents when they have no heating, hot water or electricity. That is increasingly common, despite the fact that we have had sub-zero temperatures for at least 10 days now. I also pay tribute to the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), and his team, who do an excellent job in briefing MPs on the situation with prepayment meters and are trying to research and provide up-to-the-minute advice for our constituents.

I broadly want to mention the dreadful customer service. I offered to assist my constituency caseworker with some work this week, because she was rather snowed under. It took 55 minutes for E.ON to pick up the phone, and this is probably what a lot of our constituents are experiencing; because they are at the bottom of the pile, they do not get heard. Other constituents have written to me telling me that they have not yet received their energy rebate vouchers. Since October, my constituents should have been receiving their £66 per month to help with soaring bills, yet they have not had any help. One of my constituents told me:

“I have been trying to get my voucher, with no success. I have tried calling British Gas several times and have been on the phone for hours but no one picks up. I have no other way to tell them that I have tried. I am now worried I will lose this voucher!! We are entering December now.”

This is in sub-zero temperatures. I have written to the energy companies about this, and I am still awaiting a response. The MP hotline is also failing to respond on

time. We know that some of the most vulnerable people in our society use prepayment meters, and many are having to pay more for their heating and pay back any debt.

In fact, the cost of energy is not just an issue for those who are on prepayment meters. I noticed in yesterday's press that there is even an MP who is feeling so out of pocket that he has had to claim over £3,000 from the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority because he is not able to afford his energy bill. This is obviously affecting a great many people. I would imagine that with our income, we are in a slightly better position than others. I will not mention this person's name, because I have not checked with his office. This is a wide-ranging issue facing many in society, but the people we should be worried about in terms of the public health implications are, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and others have said, people who either cannot reach their prepayment meter to adjust it or who have significant disabilities.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister says about the vouchers, because it has been well covered in the press and I hope it has been the subject of discussions with the private companies. He traditionally has been a great champion of consumers, and I hope he has not lost that zeal since he got into the bureaucracy; I am sure he has not and is just as passionate. I am sure that he listened to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) and will take immediate action this afternoon, so that we can all go and have our Christmas break knowing that our constituents will not be left at Christmas and new year dealing with suppliers who fail to pick up the telephone, MPs' staff pulling their hair out because they are not getting replies through the MP hotline, or standing charges that flip up without any advice at all.

As many will be aware, energy prices have soared in the last year. One constituent told me:

“It's impossible to understand how families will manage to find thousands of pounds extra a year and the anxiety throughout the country is almost palpable. My rent (private sector) will go up significantly and I will almost certainly have to move as a result”.

People on prepayment meters have to pay a daily standing charge, and their electric and gas costs are significantly higher. To give one example, I received a text saying that it cost £12 for a 20-minute use of hot water—that is for four young students who are trying to survive, have their showers and get themselves ready for their studies. Extrapolated over a 12-month period, that is over £4,300 just for gas, which powers the heating. This is clearly completely unacceptable and desperately needs an urgent review.

I am extremely concerned about the high cost of prepayment meters and the impact on our constituents. Another constituent told me:

“I'm a single pensioner living alone and I'm honestly scared by what I'm reading on my prepaid meter. Prices aren't going to come down in the future—they'll only rise”.

What is being done to help our pensioners, many of whom are in damp and cold homes all day? We saw the tragic loss of life of a tiny child to damp and cold in the last month. We must redouble our efforts to put more pressure on the energy companies, so that they take immediate action for the most vulnerable on prepayment meters who are paying over the odds and in advance for energy that they have not even used.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some excellent points, and this debate is incredibly important, which is why I signed the original motion. Does she agree that it is wrong for people who are already in arrears and need help with their bills to have to pay about 2% more, which I think is estimated at £84 between October and December?

Catherine West: The hon. Gentleman is right to emphasise that point. He lives on the cold Gloucester plain, which can get very chilly and snowy at this time of year, so he will understand the desperate anxiety that many people in this situation are feeling. I hope the Minister will take urgent action on this, because it is not a situation that affects people in only one part of the country. It is often people in privately rented accommodation, and these prepayment metres are literally taking all the money they have.

I want to briefly mention the inherited debt problem, which some Members will be aware of. When a tenancy changes, new tenants move in and inherit the debt from the tenants who were there before. In some cases, they put their £10 in thinking that it will keep them going for a couple of days, not realising that they are carrying the debt of the tenants before. That £10 then disappears, and they find themselves having to put in £50 or £60—which they may not have readily accessible, given all the costs that go with a new tenancy—and negotiate with a completely new provider. There has to be a way of regulating that more and getting the regulator to be much more proactive and agile in these situations, so that we do not have this inherited debt problem and new tenants do not have to suddenly find hundreds of pounds just so that they can switch on their heating. I hope that the Minister will address that problem in his remarks.

Will the Minister also comment on the practical difficulty when a supplier changes? I am aware of a constituency case in which service was very disrupted when a prepayment meter switched from npower to E.ON, which eventually got on top of the mess it inherited from npower, but the tenants had a very difficult time with only basic information. What can be done to clarify and explain the enormously costly standing charges and unit cost prices currently being charged to those in the most vulnerable housing in the UK?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson.

1.50 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) for securing this debate. She rightly said she is looking for action, and action now, rather than self-awareness, but she also said she is hopeful, verging on confident, that the Government will take action. I do not share her confidence, but hopefully the Minister will prove me wrong.

I also commend the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for their contributions.

Obviously, I disagree with the inequity of higher standing charges being applied to people on prepayment meters. We have heard several times how people with disabilities already pay more just to get through their day-to-day life, and they suffer from paying these higher

charges, too. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East and the hon. Member for Glasgow North paid tribute to Marie Curie and its “Dying without Dignity” campaign. It is heartbreaking to hear the personal example of the friends of my hon. Gentleman. I hope Mel and Tom get all the support they need. The hon. Member for East Lothian completely destroyed the euphemism of self-disconnection, and the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green covered a range of topics and constituency issues.

As well as paying tribute to hon. Members, I pay tribute to the organisations that work tirelessly on these matters, including the End Fuel Poverty Coalition, National Energy Action, Energy Action Scotland and Citizens Advice Scotland. They all agree that forced prepayment meters, especially during this cost of living crisis, will create more problems for the most vulnerable and for society.

As we have heard, the reality is that people are automatically disconnected once they reach £10 of credit. Fuel Poverty Action says:

“Imposition of a pre-payment meter is disconnection by the back door. When you can’t top up the meter everything clicks off, regardless of whether you are old, ill, or have a newborn baby.”

Forced prepayment meters mean that people who are already struggling are put on a system where they have to ration their energy and can be automatically disconnected when they reach their credit limit. They are also more likely to have a cold, damp home, with the consequent long-term health implications and the immediate heating or eating dilemma.

It is estimated that 19% of houses in the UK are damp, but the figure increases to nearly a third, 31%, of houses with a prepayment meter. In other words, a household on a prepayment meter is 65% more likely to live in a damp house compared with the average baseline.

Health conditions associated with living in a damp house have a consequence for our already stretched national health services. That reality is confirmed by figures from YouGov’s “Warm this Winter” campaign, which show that 51% of prepayment customers have health conditions or disabilities.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow North said, we have to accept that, on one level, the majority of customers on prepayment meters have chosen this as a way of managing their cash flow and energy use, but it makes no sense that the most vulnerable pay higher standing charges and are therefore at more risk of being cut off because of the £10 credit limit.

Research by Utilita indicates that as many as 14% of the 4.5 million prepayment meter households—that is 630,000 households—did not actively choose to be on these tariffs but were forced on to them. The number will dramatically increase during this cost of living crisis unless the Government take steps to ban forced switching to prepayment meters.

A recent investigation for *i* revealed that energy firms have secured almost 500,000 court warrants to install prepayment meters in the homes of customers in debt since the end of lockdown. That is an astonishing number, and Ofgem and the Government need to get a grip. Further freedom of information requests reveal that 187,000 such applications were made in the first six months of 2022 alone. There is a real concern that the courts are now rubber-stamping warrants to install prepayment meters.

[Alan Brown]

Although I have been talking about prepayment meters, the roll-out of smart meters means that customers can be forced on to prepayment mode without the need for a warrant or for the meter to be physically changed, as they were at one time. Again, I support the End Fuel Poverty Coalition's call for a ban on switching customers to a prepayment meter under warrant and a ban on switching customers' smart meters to prepayment mode without their active, informed consent.

The stark reality is that the most vulnerable are being forced on to prepayment meters. They then enter a cycle of unaffordability, energy rationing, disconnection and damp housing. To compound matters, many are missing out on the Government's support package, which makes this pernicious cycle even worse.

Caroline Abrahams, charity director of Age UK, says recent Government figures suggest that more than 40% of vouchers sent to prepayment meter households are yet to be redeemed. She expressed her concern at the estimate that at least 150,000 older households relying on old prepayment meters will miss out on the £400. This is completely unacceptable, so I ask the Minister to advise the House on what the Government are doing to ensure that the most vulnerable are able to access and use their vouchers or, if they cannot, to get some form of credit on their account.

It is unconscionable to continue charging those on prepayment meters, who are more likely to be on lower incomes, more than customers who pay for their energy by direct debit. The energy companies may argue that prepayment systems cost more to administrate, which is probably true of collecting payments, but the additional cost should not be carried by those least able to afford it. Access to energy is literally a life or death scenario, and we need to remove this standing charge inequity.

Let me illustrate the difficulty. I know someone who chooses to be on a prepayment meter. He did not use gas at all over the summer, but when he wanted to turn on the heating at the start of winter, he had to pay £70 to clear the standing charge debt built up over the summer. He could afford to do that, so it was fine, but others who rationed their energy over the summer will not be so lucky.

A briefing from Energy UK confirms that, under licence requirements following Ofgem's measures, suppliers should identify prepayment meter customers who are self-disconnecting and offer short-term support through emergency and "friendly hours" credit, as well as offering additional support credit to prepayment meter customers in vulnerable situations. In my example of a person having to pay £70 to clear the debt accrued over the summer, the supplier did not make contact to check whether there was any vulnerability or whether assistance was required. Ofgem and the Government need to ensure such steps are taken in the here and now. They must ensure that suppliers give such assistance, as per their licence obligations.

The Government may talk up the energy price guarantee, and the billions of pounds of support allocated by that package sounds good on paper, but the reality is that, even with the current unit caps, it is estimated that average bills will cost £2,500, or £3,500 in Scotland. National Energy Action estimates there are 6.7 million households in fuel poverty, which will rise by 1.7 million

in April when the average bill rises to £3,000. Nearly a third of households in Great Britain will be in fuel poverty come April.

The reality is that the energy price guarantee is no guarantee at all. Average bills are much higher in Scotland, even though, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North said, we generate the bulk of the UK's renewable energy. It is completely unfair that Scotland generates this energy, yet Scottish people are struggling to pay their bills.

I completely support a ban on forcing customers on to prepayment systems, and the higher charges applied to prepayment systems have to be abolished, and abolished now. It is time for a proper social tariff. I accept that the Government have confirmed that they are looking at implementing one, but I fear that that will take too long and that this will, invariably, be kicked into the long grass and left to the next Government.

I also support tiered tariffs, similar to the Dubai slab tariff. That would mean that those with the lowest energy usage got a significantly lower tariff. I would extend that to those classed as vulnerable and then have incremental tariffs based on usage. In general, therefore, those who used more energy and could afford to pay more would do so, as per affordability. Such a system would also incentivise demand management, which is good for the system overall.

The reality is that more action is needed on this now, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East said. I look forward to what the Minister will say, but I find it strange that a Treasury Minister will wind up rather than a Minister for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which I would have thought would be all over this.

2 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) on securing this debate—it is essential that we have it—and on her tenacity in also introducing a ten-minute rule Bill. I also congratulate her on her optimism; apparently, she really does think that the Government might do something about this issue in the near future. I wish I shared her optimism.

Anne McLaughlin: I thank the hon. Member for his kind words. I should probably clarify that I was always brought up to believe that if someone thinks and acts positively, they will get positive results. I also think, when I am asking for something as important as this, that it is probably best not to start off by being hyper-critical. I will wait to see what the Minister says and I might change my view, but I think that positive thinking will lead to positive results.

Dr Whitehead: I thank the hon. Member for emphasising her optimism; let us see how we get on this afternoon.

Hon. Members have added to the debate positively by setting out where we are on prepaid meters and a number of issues relating to their present operation, as well as where we need to go for the future. About 15% of UK households are on smart meters for electricity and 14% are on prepaid meters for gas. That may well have gone up since those figures were last calculated. As hon. Members have mentioned, about half a million

warrants to place people on to prepaid meters have been successfully passed through the courts since the beginning of the covid pandemic in 2021, so the figure is likely to be higher.

The situation is, frankly, a snapshot of the way in which the have-nots in our society are treated, as opposed to the haves. We need to keep that centrally in mind, because overwhelmingly, a substantial number of people in vulnerable circumstances, on lower incomes and in poorer housing are on prepaid meters, whereas people who are not in those circumstances have accounts. As the hon. Member set out, that means that there is a two-tier arrangement on energy debt. On one side, those with accounts can manage and work their way through very large amounts of debt. On the other side, those on prepaid meters simply cannot do that, for the simple reason that as soon as they go over the credit limit, they are out—their meter has, effectively, been switched off—and they have no more energy. Let us be clear: from the point of view of energy supply companies, that is the most efficient way to get rid of the problem that they might face, under other circumstances, of having to pursue customers for debt. Companies can simply put people on prepaid meters and they then self-disconnect, ending the problem for the energy supply companies.

As my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and other hon. Members said, in a recent court case in the north of England, about 496 warrants were agreed in a very short period for people to go on to a prepaid meter despite what they wanted to happen. Some people like the way that prepaid meters operate, in terms of balancing the family budget, but I would suggest that they are in a minority. Most people are on prepaid meters because they have to be and their circumstances do not allow them to do otherwise. However, it is not really the case that the courts can just rubber stamp warrants. It would be very difficult to rubber-stamp 496 warrants in three minutes—that was the speed at which the warrants were recently dealt with in that particular court case. A conveyor belt of warrants for prepaid meters is currently going through the courts, adding up to the enormous figure that I mentioned.

As hon. Members have said, there is already a differential with prepaid meters. The have-nots pay more and the haves pay less on tariffs, standing charges and so on. That is remarkable because, prepaid meters are a very good thing for the cash flow of energy companies and for getting money in up front, which I would have thought would lead to lower rather than higher charges for prepaid meters.

Catherine West: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is yet another example of rip-off Britain?

Dr Whitehead: That is right. We are allowing a group of customers to be ripped off much more easily than other people in the energy sphere. It is good that we have shone a light on that this afternoon, because this needs urgent action. For the short term, I hope that the Government will say that there should be a moratorium on further warrants to put people on to prepaid meters, at least for duration of the energy crisis. That would at least mean that, as hon. Members have already said, we would not be putting more people into a situation in which they face impossible choices in their household management. In a number of instances, people literally cannot reactivate their systems when they have been

disconnected, or have self-disconnected. They simply do not have the wherewithal to get back on the prepaid meter horse, as it were, because—among other things—the standing charges continue to ratchet up.

People are also paying grossly inflated prices when they are not the direct bill payer. I am thinking of people in park homes and in various other circumstances where the landlord has a meter-charge arrangement that bears no relation to what that should be, were the money to go into the meter. So, given the energy crisis, there are a great many areas in which the Government must take action in the near future in recognition of the fact that people with prepayment meters are at the coalface when it comes to energy poverty.

Anne McLaughlin: May I ask, for the purpose of clarification, whether Labour supports at least a moratorium on so-called self-disconnection, so that no one with a prepayment meter can be disconnected, at least over this winter?

Dr Whitehead: Yes, indeed. I said it a few moments ago, and I am happy to repeat it. That, I think, is the minimum that needs to be done at this point, given the crisis faced by people with prepayment meters. However, as has already been pointed out this afternoon, a number of other actions need to be taken in the longer term to ensure that people with prepayment meters are at least on a level playing field when it comes to their energy supplies, and I hope the Government will think about that very seriously. There are a number of ideas that Labour could offer for how that long-term level playing field might be achieved, and I should be happy to work with the Government to bring it about. However, what is most important is for the Government to understand and recognise the present dire situation, and for the Minister to confirm this afternoon that they will take the necessary action to put it right so that people are no longer in such a desperate position—in so many circumstances—and are, at least, not in a “have/have not” situation.

2.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kevin Hollinrake): Let me begin by thanking the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) for the positive way in which she introduced this important and sensitive debate. Like her, I have always adopted the principle that we get more with sugar than we do with salt, so I do whatever I can to protect the customers about whom she is concerned, particularly those with prepayment meters. As she said, the problems among that cohort will become worse during the winter, notably the cost of living crisis and the cold weather—nowhere more than in Scotland, she said, although north Yorkshire also gets fairly cold at this time of year, as, indeed, do other parts of the country: my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) mentioned parts of his own constituency where people are being affected.

The Government entirely share the hon. Lady's concerns. It is of course important to bear in mind suggestions, such as those made in today's debate, of ways in which to keep our rules and regulations and processes under review to ensure that these vulnerable people are protected. However, we are able to provide robust protections and financial support for people in those circumstances, and I shall say more about that shortly.

[Kevin Hollinrake]

The problems of debt create great anxiety, and that is another element that requires consideration. At times in the past I have been in debt, both personally and in my business life, and I know how anxious it can make people and their families. For some years I co-chaired the all-party parliamentary group on poverty, whose aim was to reduce the impacts of poverty and which considered matters such as the poverty premium, which is relevant to the issue of prepayment meters.

Ours is not the only country that has these meters; they are used around the world, with the purpose of managing debt. The one thing that people in circumstances such as this need to be able to do is budget properly. I think it was acknowledged by the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) that prepayment meters have a role in helping people to budget, and can reduce the chances of their getting into debt or their debt increasing, making their position even worse.

Catherine West: I think the whole House would accept that advice on debt and debt management is crucial, but when a student household is spending £12 for 20 minutes of hot water, which, extrapolated over 12 months, is £4,300—and that is not even a dual fuel bill; it is a single bill—there is a problem, and it has nothing to do with debt management.

Kevin Hollinrake: That is definitely an issue. We need to ensure that people have access to fair deals, and I shall say more about that in a moment.

As was acknowledged by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), one of the difficulties involved in not using a prepayment meter is the fact that the only alternative would be court action, which could potentially increase the debt and affect someone's credit rating, which is the least desirable outcome.

Anne McLaughlin: The Minister seems to be arguing that if the energy companies have to take people to court, it will cost those people more than having their prepayment meters cut off. The point is that they will not be taken to court immediately. Someone like me can wait for a year while the energy company is trying to work out some plan. Energy companies are more likely to work with the person concerned to find a way for them to pay their bills than to take them to court straight away.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady has raised an important point about people being treated equally. In these circumstances, people will often have been through the processes that she has described. They will have been on normal payment terms, and there will have been a debt recognition and reconciliation process that may have ended up with people either adopting a prepayment meter voluntarily or, as a last resort, having one forced upon them. There are mechanisms, which I will explain in a minute, whereby people are granted abeyance and forbearance.

In the case of many households, if debt were allowed to spiral out of control—and that is not generally voluntary; it is more often due to matters beyond the control of those households, and it is important that we

provide support for them—the suppliers themselves could find themselves in a perilous position. These are commercial suppliers of electricity and gas. In fact, this could force out of the market suppliers who specialise in cases such as this. The last thing we want is a lack of provision for people in these circumstances.

These prepayment meters have moved on from the ones that we used to have. The modern smart meters are far easier to top up remotely, and make it easier to check balances.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being very generous.

My constituency office is being contacted by a great many people who have still not received their prepayment vouchers from the energy suppliers, but are receiving letters from the suppliers telling them that if they do not use the vouchers by January they will be cancelled, which would of course push those people further into debt. What are the Government doing to ensure that they receive the vouchers and do not lose the money to which they are entitled?

Kevin Hollinrake: Other Members have made that important point, and I will come to it, but I had better make some progress, because you asked me to finish in about four minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker, which I shall endeavour to do.

We believe that there is a role for prepayment meters. Ofgem rules already require energy suppliers to offer a prepayment service only when it is safe and reasonably practicable to do so, and that applies whether a meter is smart or traditional. There are clear obligations on energy suppliers regarding customers in payment difficulty, and a prescribed process for occasions on which a warrant is required. That point was raised by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and, indeed, by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East.

There are clear expectations for suppliers in respect of the steps to be taken before they instal a prepayment meter owing to debt, or switching a smart meter from credit to prepayment mode. Those steps include conversations to discuss debt repayment, budget management and energy efficiency measures, and referrals to debt advisers and charities. Before a prepayment meter is chosen as the debt repayment pathway, its safety must be assessed, as well as the customer's ability to pay. Suppliers must give their customers seven days' notice before installing a prepayment meter or switching a smart meter to prepayment mode. Ofgem recently published a regulatory expectations letter, in which it set out its expectation that suppliers will ensure that prepayment meters are safe and reasonably practicable in every case.

I would like to highlight some of the circumstances in which it is not deemed safe to have a prepayment meter, which include having specific disabilities or illnesses, or having children under five, as has been set out. Indeed, the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) raised that point. It is absolutely right that we provide support for those who are most in need.

The hon. Member also raised the issue of social tariffs, which were introduced in 2008 as part of a voluntary agreement between the Government and energy suppliers. They were replaced by the current mandated warm home discount scheme in 2011. This has improved

outcomes by providing consistent and transparent benefits, and by utilising data matching to improve targeting. Clearly, it is important that we continue to review our current provisions and see what else might be done to help people in those circumstances.

Alan Brown: The Minister almost seems to be making an argument that the warm home discount scheme has been more successful than the social tariffs. Why then has the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy confirmed that it is considering revisiting social tariffs? I do support that, but he seems to be making a contrary argument.

Kevin Hollinrake: I do not think it is a contrary argument. We should always look to improve our rules. We believe it is an improvement on the past scheme, but there may be further improvements we can make. That is the right iterative process to take.

Richard Graham: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes—for the last time, if I can.

Richard Graham: On action, what does the Minister think can be done on social tariffs?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is a very good point. We are happy to listen to evidence from right across the House on different things that might be done, but clearly the most important thing is to ensure that support is targeted at those most in need. If there are better ways to do that, then we should certainly be listening. I would be very happy to talk to my hon. Friend at any point about any suggestions he might have. I know these issues are very important to him, so I am very keen to continue that conversation.

Catherine West: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am sorry, but I am already past my time. I will have to conclude.

As Members will know, the Government have stepped in through various different mechanisms, including the energy price guarantee, energy bills support scheme and the energy bill relief scheme for businesses, with about £75 billion of taxpayer support for those areas.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green talked about inherited debt, which is a very interesting point. We have not had evidence of that. If she has evidence of that and could write to me, I would be very interested in taking that up for her.

Before I conclude, I want to touch on standing charges, which is a very important point. We want to ensure that the market is as competitive as possible, so that people can access fair deals and we do not get the poverty premium that I mentioned earlier. Under Ofgem rules, charges must reflect the cost of delivering the service. It can be the case that there is a higher cost to suppliers for operating supplies for those on prepayment meters. It is important that we continue to look at that to see whether there might be better ways to ensure those customers are treated more fairly.

To conclude, the Government are listening to consumers and industry. We are providing a substantive support package via the energy bills support scheme and the

energy price guarantee. Ofgem, the regulator, has set robust regulatory protections for consumers on prepayment meters. We are committed to providing the support and protections necessary to ensure that consumers and industry will thrive in the decades to come. *[Interruption.]*

I will conclude by talking about the vouchers. There is a problem in terms of vouchers. About 60% of people have managed to gain support through vouchers. We have written to suppliers on this particular matter. We need to improve the communication between suppliers and customers to ensure that take-up is higher. We believe that the take-up will improve over future weeks, but we are definitely keeping that under review and are keen to ensure all that support reaches households where it is intended to do so.

2.24 pm

Anne McLaughlin: I thank everybody who participated in the debate and who signed the application. I also thank my team—it was my office manager, Margaret Young, who first brought this issue to my attention. I do not think she realised how much it was going spiral. I want to thank all my team, most of whom are sitting in the Gallery today: Michael Bannister, Robyn Hendry, Ruairi Kelly, Kilian Riley, Niamh McGeechan and Caitlin Burgess. The reason I am thanking them is because they have all got involved in this. They have all helped to develop this campaign—and it is a campaign, because this is not the end of it. I have not heard answers to my questions today, I am afraid to say, and I am really concerned.

One of the things I am concerned about is that the Minister says that we cannot allow debt to spiral out of control. In that case, we should all be paying our bills in advance as well, because our debt could spiral out of control. It does not, so why can everybody not simply be treated the same way?

The last point I will make is on processes. The Minister talked about how different processes have to be gone through, but there is no consistency of approach—Ofgem has said that there is no consistency of approach. The whole thing is a mess. There is so much that needs to be sorted out, so I will keep asking. I will ask every day, and I will not just ask the Minister.

I am going to ask for at least a moratorium over the Christmas and then, when we come back in January, we can start to sort out this mess of prepayment meters. We cannot go back to our warm homes now and say, “Bye, bye. I hope you don’t get cut off, but you probably will because you can’t afford to pay your bills.” We have to do something. A moratorium for now is the least we can do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House recognises that prepayment meter customers, who pay for their usage in advance, are not afforded the same rights when in energy debt as customers who pay in arrears, such as those who pay in direct debit; understands that a prepayment meter customer is automatically disconnected when they exceed just £10 of debt; acknowledges that, in contrast, those who pay in arrears are afforded time and support to resolve their debts before action is taken to disconnect; is deeply concerned that so called self-disconnection of prepayment meter customers will see the most vulnerable in our society left without heat, light and facilities to cook and wash over the coming winter; and strongly urges the Government to outlaw self-disconnection to ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable customers are not left without basic energy provision.

West Coast Main Line: Services

2.26 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered rail transport services for communities served by the West Coast Main Line.

I am grateful to those from both sides of the House who are here today for this important debate on the west coast main line. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate. It is on a cross-party issue, and the irony is not lost on me that many Members are only here because they could not get a train back yesterday.

The west coast main line rail service has been the subject of some debate in this House already over recent months. Since Avanti became the franchise holder, taking over from Virgin in December 2019, services have been cut, cancellations are rife, staff morale is at rock bottom, and passengers and communities are suffering. Many have voiced their concerns and dissatisfaction with the service that Avanti has been running in questions, letters and conversations with Ministers. I have called this debate because this issue is important. It is important to our communities that we recognise and raise the issues we are all facing as a result of Avanti's substandard service, and that our constituents know that we are working hard to keep the matter on the Government's radar. My own community of Ynys Môn has been particularly badly hit, and I would like to give the House some background on why this matter is so important to my constituents.

Holyhead, as a port, has been a key point in the transport of mail from London to Ireland since at least the last quarter of the 16th century. In the early 1800s, the demand for faster delivery meant that mail started to divert via the port of Liverpool, which already had a rail link. It was the introduction of a new rail line in 1848 that saved Holyhead from becoming a backwater. From that point, Holyhead offered the fastest route for mail to Ireland. It was the speed of rail transportation that maintained Holyhead's route as an important port and town. It remains the second busiest ro-ro port in the UK, with many passengers coming in by train and onward by ferry to and from Ireland.

As a terminus, the railway also brings Holyhead and the rest of Ynys Môn much-needed local employment. The island has one of the lowest GVAs—gross value added—in the UK, and Holyhead is home to some of the most deprived communities in Wales. Before rail was privatised, many local people worked for British Rail, either on the trains or as part of Sealink ferry services. Some are still employed by Avanti, Transport for Wales and Stena Line. Our local shops and services provide for passengers coming in on trains, bringing extra income into the town. Direct trains to London also offer an opportunity for local people growing up in rural north Wales to access the cultural and historic attractions of London, and experience the heady excitement of the big city.

So for Holyhead in particular, the railway is not just something that passes through the town. It has been part of the very fabric of life for 175 years. No one expected this way of life to suffer such a blow from the change of franchise. We all understand that our rail operators, including Avanti, went through very challenging

times during the pandemic, and we understand that during it, it was necessary to cut the number of trains running at that time. The problem is that Avanti not only has not picked its game back up, but has allowed its services to deteriorate.

Our rail timetable has been shattered, with direct services between London and Holyhead hacked. Local ferry passenger numbers have been challenged by the lack of through train services from London. This has also stopped my constituents from accessing the cultural, political and historical collateral of the UK's capital city. Those with mobility needs or travelling with children are particularly disadvantaged by cuts in direct services. Local people who commute from north Wales to other parts of the UK have been severely affected.

Some hon. Members will know from my recent Adjournment debate that Ynys Môn recently experienced another connectivity disaster, when the Welsh Government put in place an emergency closure on the Menai suspension bridge, having allowed the bridge to fall into disrepair. The bridge is one of only two physical links between the island and the mainland. As one constituent who moved to Anglesey to run his business told me,

“with the whole range of transport problems affecting Ynys Mon and the adjoining mainland I am starting to regret my decision to base the core of my business here and I suspect that many others share my view.”

Prior to the pandemic, the Trainline website claimed:

“It is possible to travel from Holyhead to London Euston without having to change trains. There are nine direct trains from Holyhead to London Euston each day.”

But in February this year, we had just one direct train running each way between Holyhead and London. When I wrote to Avanti to raise my concerns, its response was:

“We are currently working closely with Government, Network Rail and industry partners to update our timetable which we hope to move forward with in the next few weeks—this will include the reintroduction of further services to North Wales.”

In June, Avanti said that we would have six direct trains a day in north Wales. That did not materialise, and by August it was axing trains across the whole network and introduced a significantly reduced timetable. As Transport Focus put it,

“The primary aim of introducing a reduced timetable is to ensure a reliable service is delivered to passengers so they can travel with greater certainty without the frustration and inconvenience caused by short-notice cancellations.”

However, in the second half of this year, complaints that I received about Avanti's rail service from both passengers and staff increased by over 600%. A recent report from Transport Focus found that 28% of Avanti passengers said that they had experienced a change, cancellation or delay to their journey. Just over four in 10 passengers rated Avanti's communication about delays as good. A quarter of Avanti passengers said that the level of crowding was poor.

For months, Avanti's own travel tracker has shown a plethora of delayed and cancelled trains, many of which it has blamed on staff shortages, broken down trains or trains diverted to cover previously cancelled services. Data from the Office of Road and Rail shows that, between July and September, even though it had already removed thousands of services from its schedules, less than half of Avanti West Coast trains ran on time. One in eight was cancelled. That is nearly twice as many cancellations as the UK average. Many of us will recognise

the reality of the situation all too well. Travelling with Avanti has become a lottery. A good, pain-free, on-schedule journey is such a novelty that my team celebrate when it happens.

We have been told by Avanti West Coast that the service will return to pre-pandemic frequency. However, a look at its timetable released this week for 11 December to 20 May next year shows just five direct trains each way between Holyhead and London Monday to Saturday, and three on a Sunday. The timetable for today, sitting as it does immediately after a strike day, offers four direct trains from London to Holyhead, with three making the return journey. That was this morning. Even I will admit that five, four or even three direct trains is better than the one we had earlier this year, but planning journeys is still a nightmare. Although Avanti has apparently committed to give us reliable timetables six to eight weeks in advance of travel, when I looked earlier this week, its website still showed no train timetable for some dates in January.

What worries most of us now is not what it says on the timetable but what happens in reality. After months of listening to Avanti's promises and then suffering when it fails to deliver, I do not view the timetable with a great deal of optimism. How has this come to pass? What has turned a once reasonably reliable train service into what we have today?

Like other operators, Avanti was impacted by the pandemic. It has also been impacted by the nationwide RMT strikes and actions by other unions. However, its problems largely stem from staffing issues. For years, train operators have used staff working overtime to keep all their services running. They have relied on workers doing extra shifts on their day off to help crew trains. Avanti is blaming its problems on staff withdrawing their support for this arrangement, but according to staff, Avanti's actions since taking over the franchise have led to this point. It has cut staff without replacing them and reduced morale to such an extent that workers have stopped volunteering for extra shifts.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): On the hon. Lady's point on staff, my understanding is that since Avanti took over the franchise, it has got rid of 175 catering roles. That is having an impact on the service provided on board in standard class as well as first class. The service that Avanti is providing is significantly worse than what Virgin, the previous franchise holder, provided.

Virginia Crosbie: I thank the hon. Member for that important intervention. He makes a clear point about the services that are being axed. They affect not only the people using the transport but those who are trying to work on the trains and offer a good service.

Mike Whelan, the general secretary of ASLEF, said earlier this year that Avanti

"does not employ enough drivers to deliver the services it has promised passengers it will run. In fact, the company itself has admitted that 400 trains a week are dependent on drivers working their rest days."

Avanti says that it is working hard to address the problems by recruiting more staff. It says that by the end of December it will have 100 more drivers than in April. But Avanti staff are deeply unhappy and sceptical, as anyone who travels regularly will know.

Many Avanti staff have been working on the route for years. They moved to Avanti from Virgin when the franchise was changed. They have experience of working on the route when it was not perfect but at least functional. Earlier this month, the RMT carried out a survey of Avanti staff that showed that 92% of respondents are either not very confident or have no confidence at all in Avanti's ability to deliver the improvements that it has been told to make to its services. More than 80% agree that their working lives have got harder since Avanti took over, there are not enough staff on the route and Avanti is mismanaging the workforce.

Avanti's own staff rated service to passengers at just 22 on a scale of zero to 100. One respondent stated:

"the staffing issues started way before July. Jobs haven't been backfilled for a long time".

Another said,

"staff shortages have been an issue for months...Poor management of key contracts have made working for Avanti unpleasant and embarrassing."

The survey details that frontline staff are on the receiving end of a high level of abuse from frustrated passengers. They say that management is chaotic, there is not enough information about services, and there are too few staff and too many last-minute shift changes. They say they feel disrespected, undervalued, demotivated, stressed and angry.

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): My hon. Friend is making some very good points. Would she, for the record, agree that the staff who are there, despite feeling undervalued and demoralised, do a wonderful job in being cheerful, trying to be as upbeat as they can and delivering the best service they can in the face of such difficult conditions? The staff are doing their best in trying circumstances.

Virginia Crosbie: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Personally, I am looking forward to getting on that train today. Some of these people are my friends—they light up my life—they are important and they are trying to do an important job in challenging times.

As one staff member said:

"The company has been run into the ground by Avanti...and the frontline are the ones taking the brunt of it. In my 15 years' service I have never seen such a shambles."

From the passenger perspective, one constituent recently wrote:

"There is no shortage of people who want to use trains; ticketholders come from all walks of life and are prepared to pay for safe, comfortable and efficient journeys by rail. These services can and have been delivered at times but, overall, the Chester to Holyhead service is...a byword for rip-off rail."

In October, despite requests from many of us to terminate the franchise, the Government granted Avanti an extension of six months to get its house in order. Two months on, we have a new timetable that no one, including the Avanti staff, believes is realistic, a service cancellation rate that has done nothing but increase over the past year, and a history of broken promises from Avanti. It has until March 2023 to sort this sorry mess out.

Avanti's website calls the west coast main line:

"Britain's premier long-distance railway, linking together towns and major cities to create a vital economic artery for the UK."

It goes on to say that it is

"on a mission to run a railway that generates prosperity and pride, right across the nation...an iconic railway the country can be proud of".

[Virginia Crosbie]

No one would be happier than me if it achieved that mission. My journey home takes four hours on a good day, and the thought of more miserable months waiting on cold platforms or rearranging meetings because of sudden service cancellations does not fill me with a warm glow of joy. So I am coming clean and admitting that, like so many of my constituents, I have a vested interest in Avanti getting it right.

Looking at the timetables for today, I have absolutely no idea what time I will get home to Holyhead tonight—or if at all. All I can see are the words in red: “Delayed”, “Delayed”, “Cancelled”, “Not available to buy” and “Delayed”. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that the extension granted in October will be Avanti’s last chance, that it cannot keep blaming its failings on everything and everyone else and that, if we do not see significant improvements in service and a reliable road map to return the west coast main line to at least pre-pandemic levels by March, its franchise will be removed and the service put under the operator of last resort?

2.41 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I declare an interest and refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on securing the debate. This is an issue that impacts hundreds of MPs, because the rail service that Avanti delivers connects us all.

I agree with the hon. Member’s closing remarks. If we were to think of a company that symbolised rip-off rail, Avanti would be the first to come to mind. It has a habit of blaming everyone when it comes to its failure. Poor management, expensive tickets, an unreliable service and trains that are not maintained or cleaned properly are all issues. I hope to cover some of them. I will not take too much of the House’s time.

My inbox is often full of people complaining about cancellations, uncertainty, lost business and students unable to go to their university or college because of the poor service provided by Avanti. It seems that one unifying factor around Avanti is that it is pretty much universally disliked. Whether passengers, businesses, staff members who work on its trains or those who supply the trains, everyone seems to have something to say about Avanti and it is almost always negative.

I know the Minister on a personal level and know that he is a hard-working Member of Parliament. A couple of weeks ago, I raised with him that TransPennine Express, which is experiencing similar problems on the network, is owned by FirstGroup, which owns 70% of the Avanti franchise. The Government should hold FirstGroup to account for the failures on Avanti, which are being replicated on TransPennine Express, because this is simply not good enough. It is not acceptable. I have tabled a number of written parliamentary questions on the subject. The fact is that Avanti has damaged the economy in my constituency as well as the wider north-west region.

In my intervention, I referred to the 175 catering roles that Avanti has axed, but there are even more problems when it comes to catering on trains. The equipment is often faulty, so passengers cannot pay with a card. Sometimes, they only take card and not cash—it depends on the train and what equipment there is.

The trains seem to be frequently understaffed. We have heard about the issues with drivers on Avanti. Having spoken to many people who work for Avanti West Coast, the reality is that senior management are viewed as toxic by members of staff. I prefer to travel by train rather than drive to London. My experience as a customer is almost all negative.

The debate is about west coast main line services, so I will not delve too much into ticket office closures, but my views are on record about ticket office closures and the support that those offices provide to people with mobility issues and those who might need extra help at a station. We need a wider debate next year about the value of ticket offices at railway stations.

A lot has been said about drivers and people who work on the trains, and I want to reference the “Justice for Cleaners” campaign. Last week I was outside the Department for Transport when shop stewards from the RMT handed in a letter to the Department regarding extremely low pay, long hours and the difficult jobs that cleaners do on the railway. Avanti does not have a good reputation. Those who have travelled on its trains will have seen that often they are not clean, they seem to be unhygienic and the toilets are in a terrible state.

During the pandemic, we all were happy to clap for cleaners and key workers, because they kept us safe and did a difficult job. Sadly, many cleaners across the world lost their lives during the pandemic because of the exposure they faced. Atalian Servest has the contract for Avanti West Coast. It is well known for low pay and long hours. A friend of mine—I would not like to name her—lives in my constituency, and I knew her son. Sadly he is not with us any more. She works as a cleaner on the railway, and I often bump into her on the journey from Westminster back to Stockport. We need to make sure that they get decent pay so that they do not have to rely on food banks. Research by the RMT shows that one in 10 railway cleaners are using food banks. One quarter of cleaners are skipping meals, and one in three are reliant on credit cards to survive. A shocking 84% of railway cleaners are struggling to make ends meet. Those figures are staggering.

A lot is said about collective bargaining, but if we look at the staffing model for the railways, we see that cleaners often tend to be some of the lowest-paid people. Inflation is at almost 11%, thanks to economic mismanagement by the Government, and those people are often on zero-hours contracts or low pay. We need to make sure that they are on a minimum of £15 an hour and get proper sick pay, travel facilities and a decent pension. It is not much to ask for in one of the richest economies in the world that people who clean our trains are paid a decent wage.

I noticed that earlier this week during Prime Minister’s questions, there was a question from a Conservative MP about the shocking state of the Avanti West Coast franchise. The Prime Minister said:

“My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the unacceptable deterioration in the quality of Avanti’s service.”—[*Official Report*, 30 November 2022; Vol. 723, c. 898.]

I am glad that the Prime Minister is aware of what is faced by the millions of people who have to travel on Avanti. I know that the Minister sent a comprehensive letter to MPs this afternoon. In my view, it does not go far enough, but I am grateful to him for that correspondence.

As I have the Minister's attention, I highlight the fact that I wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport on 29 November with a series of questions. I have not received a response. I have tabled a written question seeking a response, so I hope he can help me get a response to that letter.

I will finish on the point that the root cause of the failures with Avanti, but also with TransPennine Express and other rail companies, is privatisation. These firms prioritise profit extraction over public service and connectivity. Avanti has terrible customer service, and it prioritises profit extraction over fair pay for its staff and the people who work on its trains, such as cleaners. Public transport is a public service. Having good public transport links is excellent for our environment, air quality, connectivity, economic growth other such issues. We really do need better.

This might be a rare occasion when I entirely agree with a Member on the Government Benches, but I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Ynys Môn that Avanti should not be allowed to run the franchise beyond April next year. We need to make sure that the Government do not extend the contract and that the franchise goes back into public ownership, so that it is run for people and the planet, rather than for FirstGroup shareholders to feed off. I will finish there. I could say a lot more, and I apologise for stepping out earlier—please forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker. Once again, I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate, and I look forward to the other contributions.

2.49 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on securing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee on facilitating it. I guess that the debate is of interest to a considerable number of Members of this House, and I suspect that the reason the Chamber is not fuller today is that a lot of them are in Euston station waiting to see whether they can get a train home. Indeed, to be absolutely frank, the only reason that I am here is that I had the foresight to bring my car on Sunday—I did not want to take my chances with Avanti today immediately before Christmas.

The west coast main line is one of the most important pieces of transport infrastructure in this country, as it links the capital with major population centres such as Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Importantly for my constituents, as my hon. Friend said, it also connects to the north Wales main line, which links the capital to north Wales towns and Holyhead, which is the principal ferry port to Ireland.

For my constituents, the west coast and north Wales main lines are a lifeline to the capital city and the major cities of the north-west and the midlands. North Wales is an extremely important holiday destination, so it is vital for the north Wales economy that there should be good, reliable and frequent links to London and other cities. Similarly, north Wales businesspeople and travellers are entitled to have those links to the capital.

Sadly, the rail network is currently beset by strikes, but that aside, north Wales has not enjoyed a decent train service for quite a long time. For many years, as we have heard, the franchise was operated by Virgin Trains and the service was generally regarded as good, reliable and efficient. In 2019, however, the franchise was granted

to Avanti West Coast, which is a joint venture of FirstGroup and Trenitalia, as we have heard. Since then, matters have declined considerably. It is ironic that an Italian company is involved, because it used to be said that the only decent thing that Mussolini ever did was make the Italian trains run on time.

It is no exaggeration to say that Avanti has performed deplorably for much of the year, and nowhere has that performance been more lamentable than in north Wales. For much of the time since August, there has been, at best, only one through train a day between Holyhead and London. Travellers from stations across north Wales have been obliged to change trains once and sometimes twice at Chester and Crewe. The north Wales main line has been reduced to the status of an inefficient branch line.

Complaints are legion. I will give the House a flavour of some of the complaints that I have received from my constituents. One said:

“The current North Wales to London service is the worst I have known in the 30 years that I have used it”,

and that that makes it “impossible” for them or their wife

“to hold UK-wide appointments which require our attendance at meetings in London.”

Another said that Avanti's management of the west coast route is

“limiting our growth, because we can no longer rely on trains to and from London, as we did when Virgin ran the train line. As such, we have missed many business opportunities because we have had so many trains cancelled, resulting in our clients losing confidence in our service. We have also had return trains delayed, meaning we have incurred unnecessary expense and inconvenience as we have had to stay in hotels and lose valuable working hours the next day.”

I received one on Monday that said:

“I returned to Colwyn Bay on the 18:10 Avanti train from London Euston last Friday. The train consisted of only five coaches instead of the advertised 10 and effectively departed dangerously overloaded due to the number of passengers having to stand. The on-board seat booking system was absent, causing much confusion, no refreshment/buffet service available, and the service arrived over 20 minutes late to Colwyn Bay. In all, a very poor service, which, sadly, I have become accustomed to.”

I could regale the House with similar personal experiences, such as of my five-hour journey home last Friday that would normally take under three hours.

Those complaints are entirely justified when one looks at the empirical evidence. The website of the Office of Rail and Road reveals that the average rate of cancellations in Great Britain as a whole was 4.1% in the quarter from July to September 2022. However, in the same quarter, the rate of cancellations for Avanti West Coast was 12.1%—almost three times the national average. On punctuality, the percentage of recorded station stops arrived at on time for Great Britain as a whole was 67.7%; for Avanti, it was 38.8%—almost twice as bad.

As we have heard, Avanti's operational problems have primarily been caused by a shortage of available drivers. It has pursued a business model of relying heavily on drivers undertaking overtime work as a matter of course. The short-sightedness of that approach is manifest in the dreadful service that north Wales rail passengers have endured, despite the best efforts of Avanti train staff, who I have no doubt are just as dispirited by the current situation as anyone else. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn, I highly

[Mr David Jones]

value the work of Avanti train staff, who are always cheerful and efficient; it is just that they are trying to do their best while working for a really inefficient operation.

In August, the vast majority of Avanti staff refused to work overtime, meaning that the company, instead of having the staff to run 400 services, had enough to run only 50. Avanti called this “unofficial strike action”. ASLEF disputes that, saying that drivers do not have to work overtime, and it is hard not to have some sympathy with that view. The fact is that if Avanti wanted to take on the franchise, it was up to the company to ensure that it could deliver on its obligations. Avanti says that all train operators rely on overtime to deliver services, but other, comparable train operators have not had the difficulties that it has experienced. For example, LNER, which runs the east coast franchise, has run a normal timetable since February. Avanti must therefore be incapable of cultivating good relations with its staff in such a way as to achieve an acceptable service.

Avanti formerly operated the franchise under an emergency recovery measures agreement, which fell due to be renewed on 16 October. Many of us fervently hoped that it would not be renewed; indeed, north Wales Conservative MPs wrote to the DFT urging it not to renew it. However, before the 16th, the Department announced that Avanti’s franchise would be extended to 1 April 2023 to assess whether the company could improve its services.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn, Avanti has introduced a new timetable with effect from 11 December, although that timetable still represents a reduction in the normal levels of service. Given the strikes that we are currently enduring, it is probably too early to say whether the timetable will hold. However, it is ominous that, as of yesterday, ASLEF has been balloting its members on strike action over new rosters.

Frankly, Avanti’s stewardship of the west coast franchise has been nothing short of appalling. It has not provided, and it continues not to provide, a proper standard of service to passengers on the west coast main line, and that failure must not be ignored by the Government. I have had a letter from my hon. Friend the Minister today saying that the Government are working with Avanti to try to improve the service. My suspicion is that, with respect, he is flogging a dead horse, because I do not think that Avanti is capable of improvement.

The current situation is not just inconveniencing travellers; it is damaging the economy right across the country, not least in the part of the world I represent. It is impossible to see any good reason why Avanti should continue to operate the west coast franchise. At the earliest possible moment, the Government should remove the franchise from Avanti and seek a new operator for the west coast main line. Avanti has had its chance, and it has failed. There is no reason why passengers in north Wales or in any other part of the country should be expected to continue to endure the consequences of Avanti’s sheer incompetence.

2.59 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on securing this important debate today. Those of us

who travel on this line sympathise with all the tales we have heard today and everything that she has said, because we are all suffering the same terrible journeys. As someone who has travelled pretty much every week from Wilmslow in my constituency to London since 2017, when I became the MP for the area, I have a wide knowledge of the service on which to draw and plenty of first-hand experience of the journey.

The west coast main line is one of the major routes in Great Britain, stretching 399 miles from London to Glasgow and Edinburgh via the west midlands and the north-west of England. The Department for Transport describes the west coast main line as

“one of our most important rail corridors.”

It links four of Britain’s biggest conurbations and serves all rail markets—inter-city, commuter, regional and freight—and there are 11 train operating companies using the line. However, I wish to keep my comments to the Manchester to London route and to Avanti. The train service between Wilmslow and London, on that Manchester to London line, used to be hourly, direct and took one hour and 50 minutes. Since the pandemic, the rise in industrial action and the start of Avanti operating the line, the service has gone shockingly downhill, ending now in the substandard service that we have today.

A few weeks ago, Bee Rowland, a rail traveller, caused a Twitter storm by posting a picture of her child whom she had stuffed in a luggage rack. I sympathised with her, because I had done exactly the same thing, only it was not a child that I had stuffed in the luggage rack—it was me, for the full two-hour journey. That was because people from several trains had had to cram into one train. Most people were standing, but, fortunately—I say fortunately, but it was ironically—I managed to squeeze into the travel rack and sat there for the full journey. Bee Rowland’s experience was on Grand Central, mine on Avanti.

The travelling public are being taken for fools. We no longer have a rail service; it is a rail sufferance. It is an unreliable system that has gone backwards to such an extent that it is probably as bad as British Rail used to be when it was the butt of every comedian’s joke. Trains might or might not arrive. There are delays, staff shortages, staff late for work, or just random cancellations.

I have been a lover of rail travel ever since I was young when I travelled everywhere on trains with my granddad, who started work on the railways at Lime Street station in Liverpool, aged 12, as a bag carrier, and stayed there until he retired. I am a railway lover and I have been brought up on trains, so to see the rail industry in such a mess makes me want to weep. It is being made worse, without doubt, by industrial action and the excessive strike action. It is as if the unions want to push these private train operating companies over the edge to make them fail.

The RMT’s latest act of sabotage—48-hour strikes between 13 December and 7 January, wiping £1.2 billion off the UK’s economy over Christmas—is hurting travellers, businesses and local communities. I am not excusing the management of these railway companies—certainly not—but between them and the unions, they will force people to travel by other means. It will be anything other than the trains. The people who will suffer the most will be those who work on the railways.

Since August 2022, Avanti has cut the number of trains between London, Euston and Manchester Piccadilly from one every 20 minutes to one an hour “until further notice”. It said that it had acted in the wake of industrial action

“to ensure a reliable service is delivered, so customers can travel with greater certainty.”

I am still waiting for that greater certainty, as are my constituents.

Life is difficult enough, but not to be able to get to work, to school, or to see families is unacceptable, especially at the prices that we pay to travel by train. Looking at the cancellation figures between 4 November 2021 to 12 November 2022, it appears that the average cancelled by Avanti was 5.5%, and those cancelled by other causes 6.8%—so, about 12% altogether. However, that is not the full story, because 33% of our trains have already been cancelled and so what we are saying is that 45% of trains have been cancelled. I often get to the station and find that even the guards do not know whether a train is coming or not. Then, I jump on the train to Crewe and perhaps on another one to Stafford and then I go on to London. Instead of a one hour 50 minute journey, it can take four and a half hours or even six hours, each way.

Let us look at the other side of the coin. Only last week, I had an insufferable journey to Crewe, only to find that a direct train from London had been put on at the last minute, which nobody knew about. So an empty train pulled into Crewe to give me the last leg of my journey to Wilmslow. We call these ghost trains; they are empty trains that travel up the line, pretending to get the numbers right, which they are not because nobody is on them. Sadly for its customers, Avanti West Coast had the fewest trains on time, at just 38.8%, making it the least punctual operator in the country. As for the part that runs through my patch, Avanti says that 87% of its trains from 16 October 2022 to 12 November 2022 were 15 minutes or more late. That is a huge amount that are unreliable.

So I guess there are a couple of messages for the Minister. Avanti has to get its house in order or lose its contract to somebody who can run a better rail service. We need to get our rail system back up and running. It has been knocked sideways during the lockdown and it is being battered now by industrial action, but we do not want any more excuses. We need to get our rail system back on track. So here is an idea to make our railway system reliable, regular and well-maintained: let us stop wasting those billions of pounds that are going into HS2 and get a proper train system working right across the country, locally and nationally, for all of the citizens of this country.

3.6 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I join colleagues in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on securing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee on scheduling it.

Like so many colleagues here today, I am speaking on behalf of thousands of constituents who rely on their rail services, particularly the west coast main line, but are being thoroughly let down and deserve a far better service. As one of the major cities, and indeed the newest city, along the west coast main line, Milton Keynes is served by both Avanti West Coast and London Northwestern Railway. However, even if my constituents

are lucky enough even to have a train turn up at all, the trains are often delayed, unreliable and overcrowded. I spend many a journey between Milton Keynes and London sat on the floor in between the carriages. It is a pretty miserable experience, apart from a few weeks ago when I was sitting in what is probably my usual spot on the floor just outside the toilet and I was joined by a bunch of lasses from Milton Keynes who were going to a Halloween party. We managed to strike up some conversation and they were good enough to share their cider. I had a nice journey down and arrived in London with a temporary tattoo, which is gone now. But we should not rely on generosity and community spirit to take the misery out of these journeys.

Many constituents have got in touch to share their poor experience, especially with Avanti West Coast. As Milton Keynes is one of the major community cities into London, my constituents need a punctual and reliable service to get into work, but often they just do not get one. The train service in Milton Keynes is often so bad that my constituents are resorting to driving to London stations such as Cockfosters, which is a 46-mile journey, and then taking the tube into London, rather than taking the train from Milton Keynes. In an extreme case, a constituent has shared that, due to the cancellation of two of the regular morning commuter services, they now pay more than £800 a month for a first-class ticket, just to guarantee that they will get a seat. Without paying for first class, they would face one of those overcrowded journeys that I end up on—and almost more often than not they are still paying for the privilege of being late.

Given Milton Keynes’s important and strategic location in the region, connected by rail to other major cities such as Birmingham and Manchester and well placed within that Oxford and Cambridge arc, any disruption in the rail service causes serious problems to my constituents’ everyday lives: not just difficulties in getting to work, but disruption and delays in visiting friends and family and getting to important appointments. In another case, a constituent has shared that they find the service offered by Avanti “abysmal”, with only one train an hour running from Birmingham and Manchester, down from three an hour. They have resorted to using the coach.

The problem is more than a lack of timing and reliable trains; there is also a lack of accessibility. Another constituent has been in touch, a wheelchair user who shared that, shockingly, the rail service is completely inaccessible to him on his own and often there are no staff available to help. In 2022, it is unacceptable that wheelchair users are left abandoned with no support to use the rail service.

The situation simply cannot continue. Not only does it impact my constituents, but it poses a risk to the growth and the economy of Milton Keynes as a whole. Year on year, Milton Keynes has consistently been ranked as one of the United Kingdom’s fastest-growing economies. In fact, a recent study named Milton Keynes as the fourth fastest-growing economy by the end of 2022, increasing year on year by 3.3% and adding £500 million to the local economy.

However, one of the major factors in that growth is our location and our transport connections. That is why huge local employers such as Santander move their headquarters there. But why would Santander continue to invest in our city, and why would talented people

[Ben Everitt]

continue to choose to work, live and set up their businesses here when they cannot rely on the train arriving on time or with the capacity to take them on their journey?

Navendu Mishra: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Department for Transport should conduct economic analysis of the damage that Avanti has caused to each constituency it serves? I tabled a written parliamentary question on that earlier this year, but the response from the Government was not helpful.

Ben Everitt: Far be it from me to direct my hon. Friend the Minister, but it does seem that the hon. Gentleman has an excellent point. What I assume he is getting at is that the growth of not just Milton Keynes's economy, but economies around the country is being put at risk by these poor services. Potentially, there may be data out there that we can draw on, though I would not want to draw the Department's resources too far from the clear focus on improving services, so I will leave that with the Minister to take forward.

The problem is that, while we recognise the importance of maintaining a good service on the line, we need to take things forward. We need to improve. I welcome the fact that the Government are putting pressure on Avanti to improve its services. We have heard in this debate about the short-term extension of the contract until April 2023—I note that there is no particular enthusiasm for anything more than a short-term extension at this point. That extension is not rewarding failure; it is a clear and urgent message to Avanti that it must improve its service and its performance or face losing the franchise.

I have spoken to Avanti recently. It is positive that it is getting the point because, importantly, it has apologised and accepted that its service is not good enough. I understand that changes are on the way, with nearly 100 additional drivers added to the service between April and December this year, so we could see slight but welcome improvements to the service. However, this is very early days and my constituents and I are incredibly wary. I urge the Government to continue to actively monitor the service on that line and, more importantly, to hold the company to account, so that if we do not see drastic improvements to the reliability, punctuality and frequency of the service, that contract is removed. If we do not make those changes, Milton Keynes and other stops along the west coast main line risk being left behind. With so many opportunities for growth and success coming to the new city of Milton Keynes, it would be a real tragedy if all those benefits were put at risk due to a failing train operator.

3.15 pm

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) in this important debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on securing it. Earlier this year, following months of disruption to the rail service on the west coast main line, Avanti was put on notice to improve its service. As we have heard already from a great many Members, everyone who uses Avanti—including me, as I travel between the House and my Delyn constituency—knows that, sadly, it continues to fail to provide us with the service we deserve, or even one close to that.

But, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have to offer a little note of sympathy for Avanti. Over the past few months, the man who never met a microphone he didn't like, Mick "Grinch", the union boss stealing Christmas from millions of people, and his militant arrogance, continues to ensure major operational issues across the network, and untold misery caused by his love of striking, which apparently is a last resort—of course it is. That is after a two-year global pandemic, which saw family gatherings come to a grinding halt to try to control the virus. This is the first year when everything should finally be back to normal and we can be with our families again at Christmas, but RMT members have decided to cause untold misery to families and businesses. They should be utterly ashamed of themselves.

We have a settled situation of devolution in Wales, which means that for more than two decades the people of north Wales, and the people of Delyn, have grown used to being overlooked and underfunded. We just get on with it, and we do our best to cope with whatever challenges we face. Like all my colleagues in north Wales, many of whom we have already heard from, I am determined to secure the opportunities of the levelling-up agenda, which was at the heart of the UK Government's manifesto. For so many across north Wales, levelling up is so much more than the investment, jobs, and opportunities it promises, but it is being undermined and made more difficult because of issues that we have heard so much about in this debate.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) said, the west coast main line is a critical piece of UK infrastructure. It is essential cross-border infrastructure linking England to north Wales and Scotland, as identified in Sir Peter Hendy's connectivity review. The north Wales coast line runs from Holyhead via Chester to Crewe, where it joins the west coast main line and connects directly to London. It is also vital in connecting us to the island of Ireland, and in connecting Northern Ireland with the rest of the United Kingdom through the port of Holyhead, which is the UK's second busiest roll-on roll-off port, and vital for the infrastructure of north Wales.

When the trains between Holyhead and Euston do run, which is relatively unusual in itself, there are daily frustrations, which we have heard about many times. These are things that aggravate me and other passengers: the shop is not stocked, the card machine does not work, the wi-fi does not work, the carriages are overcrowded, and people have to sit on the floor—tattoos or no tattoos, sitting on the floor is never good. Recently, people have at times been unable to book train tickets in advance, because they show as fully booked even when they are not. Many colleagues have rightly asked whether Avanti could run a bath, let alone a rail service—although I would never resort to that type of rhetoric.

Just one train per hour goes from London to Manchester, instead of three per hour, as it was before. There is one train a day from London to Chester, instead of an hourly service, and a shuttle service from Crewe to Holyhead instead of what used to be nine direct trains a day from Holyhead to London. It is astonishing.

I regularly meet and speak to Avanti's regional management. It has been reassuring to hear that they are committed to improving services and that they admit that a lot of their promises have simply not been delivered. That has led to job losses, including in some

of the most senior positions, but it is now time to deliver. A new timetable is out, with a massive amount of new services on it. That is very welcome, but trains running to the old timetable were constantly delayed, cancelled or unreliable, so I am baffled as to how Avanti will offer the extended service it has promised when the pared-back offering was so shambolic in the first place. Time will tell. I am certain that Avanti is watching this debate very closely, so I say again: it is time to deliver.

I have stayed out of these debates in the past. In the face of a lot of criticism from colleagues about the service, I have stayed pretty positive, because pressures on the train operating companies have been significant. I try to stay as reasonable as possible and be as patient as I can with them, but I am afraid that I have come to the limit of my patience. If things do not improve now, swiftly, I will be first in line to tell the Minister that the franchise should not be renewed any further, because it simply does not deliver.

3.20 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on securing this debate, which is of such importance to residents and businesses across north Wales and in my constituency. We had a Westminster Hall debate just a few weeks ago on the strategic importance of the west coast main line, and here we are again today. We seem to debate Avanti's service to our constituents almost weekly; I am coming to the conclusion that if it were as regular as our debates, we would have one of the most reliable train services in the UK. Members across the House, representing constituencies all along the west coast main line, have made important contributions today about the impact on their communities of poor service performance on the line.

Aberconwy, which is so reliant on visitors and on our connections with the rest of the UK, has been similarly affected. On behalf of residents, communities and businesses throughout Aberconwy, I want to take the opportunity once again to state that Avanti's service, particularly the service that it provides to north Wales, has been utterly unacceptable. Avanti's implementation of an emergency timetable in August was one thing, but implementing a timetable that removed direct services between London and north Wales was, and remains, inexcusable. I share the sense of upset and inconvenience that so many local businesses and residents have expressed to me.

Reliable and affordable rail is vital to the prosperity of communities in Aberconwy and north Wales as a whole. Levelling up, which we talk about so much in this place, cannot succeed without good transport connectivity. Along the coast, to the west of my constituency, my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn has worked tirelessly for three years, leading the campaign for an Anglesey freepoint, an initiative that will create tens of thousands of jobs on Anglesey and across north Wales. Rail services are vital to the success of that project, every bit as much as investment in Aberconwy.

Our plan for Aberconwy highlights the importance of investing in tourism and promoting new business. Aberconwy boasts world-class visitor attractions. We are home to Conwy castle, a world heritage site that was recently confirmed as the most beautiful castle in Europe. We have Llandudno, the queen of the Welsh resorts. We have much of Eryri and some of the most stunning

coastlines and landscapes to be found anywhere in the UK. Visitors from around the UK and around the world come to Aberconwy each year in their millions and make an invaluable contribution to our local economy, but for our economy to succeed, they need to get there. For north Wales to thrive as a visitor destination on the global stage, we need the reliable rail services that we have continually been denied.

I turn to new business. As the pandemic demonstrated so clearly, we in Aberconwy must diversify our local economy and reduce our reliance solely on tourism. Aberconwy is home to apparently limitless entrepreneurial instinct and talent—Llandudno was identified in Companies House data earlier this year as the start-up capital of the UK—but to attract new business investment and create more jobs across Aberconwy, we need reliable and convenient rail connections with the rest of the UK. Avanti is failing to deliver that service. The value that might be unlocked in Llandudno—for example, by bringing it within two and a half hours of London, which an electrified connection would achieve—would be extraordinary.

That is for the future, and I recognise that Avanti has implemented a new timetable this month to increase the number of direct services between north Wales and London—a timetable that has unfortunately been impacted by the strikes. I echo the calls of my right hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones): the reliability to which we are entitled is not being delivered, and if there is not a dramatic and marked improvement in services, the Government must move to terminate the franchise.

I would like to take this opportunity to repeat a call I have made several times in these debates: if or when the franchise is removed, its name must change to acknowledge the strategic importance of the north Wales coast main line. The relegation of the north Wales coast main line back in August to effectively that of a mere branch line indicates that the Government themselves have not yet recognised its importance, despite the work of Sir Peter Hendy in his connectivity review. I make this request once again to the Minister: will he agree to review the name of the franchise and make it the north Wales and west coast main line?

I must highlight the strategic importance of the west coast main line to one community in particular: the United Kingdom. With principal terminuses in London, Holyhead and Glasgow, the west coast main line helps to bind together the nations of Great Britain and to strengthen our familial, business and educational ties. It is indispensable to the strength of the Union between our nations and to the success of our great British economy. Sir Peter Hendy highlighted that in his connectivity review, identifying and singling out north Wales as an important point of investment to develop this all-important UK network.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to address the strikes, which have, ironically, influenced the attendance in the Chamber today, in terms of both those who would have wished to be here and those who wished to be elsewhere for Christmas. Throughout the pandemic, the UK Government injected £16 billion of UK taxpayers' money into the railway network to keep it afloat as passenger numbers collapsed. Unlike so many of my constituents and millions of people throughout the UK, not one railway worker's job was lost, despite the collapse in revenue. Not one worker was furloughed.

[Robin Millar]

Jobs were protected. Full salaries were protected. Pensions were protected. Each railway job cost hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayer money to protect.

The pandemic has changed the way that people travel and work, and passenger numbers have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. The network cannot thrive without reform, and rail workers should be united in safeguarding the long-term protection of their jobs by luring passengers back to the railway, not by taking their custom for granted. These strikes also disproportionately impact those who are in the lowest-paid jobs or provide vital public services. I thank those who do recognise that and are doing their best during this holiday season, many of whom I meet on the service. To strike at all is regrettable, and to strike at Christmas, when so many hospitality and retail businesses are trying to recover from the devastation of the pandemic is inexplicable to me and to them.

Rail has been at the heart of our nation's history and progress. This line binds our Union together. It has brought wealth to our communities, and the service on it is key to our future. If you will pardon the pun, Mr Deputy Speaker, in north Wales we see these tracks converge. My final question to the Minister is this: will he seize his place in our nation's history and secure the future of high-performing services on the north Wales and west coast main line for the benefit of us all?

3.29 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating this afternoon's timely debate. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) started the debate powerfully, and I do not disagree with a word she said. In fact, I do not disagree with pretty much anything anyone said, other than the comments of the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) about the Union and how it binds us all together. He failed at the last minute to get consensus across the Chamber. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn started well by talking about the importance of Holyhead not only to her local economy but to the wider Welsh economy, and how much Avanti's terrible service has impacted that economy and her constituents.

On Monday, every single Avanti train leaving Glasgow for London was late, in most cases by at least half an hour. Five trains were more than an hour late. The passengers on those trains were actually the lucky ones. Anyone looking to travel in the afternoon from Scotland's biggest city to England had a choice of two trains, both leaving late and arriving even later. Every other service was cancelled or terminated at Preston, which is a fine Lancashire city but about 237 miles from Euston. Lest any apologists for Avanti try to rely on the seasonal weather as an excuse, the first train on the previous Thursday was nearly two hours late arriving. The passengers on the last train arrived at Euston close to 1 am, more than six hours after they departed.

Avanti has set the west coast main line back decades, which is not hyperbole. I checked the British Rail timetables from 1982, 40 years ago, and the journey times that Avanti is now delivering almost daily are slower than the locomotives that were the backbone of the nationalised rail network in 1982.

Any criticism of Avanti or TransPennine Express in my speech is of upper management and executives, not the frontline staff, who, like everyone who has spoken in this debate, I have always found to be exemplary in their professionalism and courtesy. I am not just saying that because I am one of the many Members who will be seeking to get home on Avanti west coast main line services this evening. These services should be the Crown jewels of the British rail network, but instead they are straight out of the pound shop bargain bin, although not at a price to match.

TransPennine Express is just as bad as Avanti, and in some ways worse. On Monday it managed to run three of its seven timetabled services from Glasgow Central. Only one of four services made it to Manchester airport. Anyone looking to travel to Manchester after lunchtime was out of luck, as there were no trains at all. I put it to TransPennine Express's chief executive at yesterday's Transport Committee that, in the three weekdays prior to the strike action, only one of 12 scheduled trains made it from Glasgow to Manchester airport. That includes last Friday, when TransPennine Express managed a single train to Manchester before 5 am, after which there were zero services to England's second biggest urban area from the biggest urban area in Scotland. It is almost as if all we have heard over the past 30 years about the benefits of rail privatisation and the wonders of the free market have been hot air and blether.

At least trade unions give advance notice that their actions will mean train cancellations and disruption, so travellers can make alternative arrangements and amend their plans. Avanti and other train operators can, and often do, wait until the very last minute before pulling the plug, leaving the trains that remain in service overcrowded, late and dirty, with the staff running them bearing the brunt of passenger frustration and anger.

It is clear from Avanti, TransPennine Express and the remaining privatised parts of the rail network that the system has completely and utterly broken down. The fragmentation of operators and network infrastructure has led to a system of little accountability and no cohesion, with long-term thinking left to outsiders and the occasional individual. Private operators have no incentive to provide a public service and every incentive to wring every penny out of its operations until the next rider on the gravy train takes over the contract. For months, the Government tried to maintain the line of laissez-faire non-intervention, before scuppering negotiations by adding conditions that they knew were guaranteed to send workers back to their trade union reps. We have a rail system in England that is edging closer and closer to collapse.

Navendu Mishra: The hon. Member referenced the term "fragmentation" earlier, and Avanti often talks about the fact that it does not have enough drivers available for its services. If we had a unified public transport system that was designed to serve our communities and our planet rather than private rail operators, perhaps we could have a system where, if there was a shortage of drivers in one part of the country, they were licensed to drive trains in other parts of the country.

Gavin Newlands: That seems to be an eminently sensible suggestion, which I hope Ministers can take up. GBR, which I will touch on later in my speech, seems to be no

more, but I hope that the Government look at all the factors in our entire rail network in the round. That is a perfectly good suggestion.

Collectively, the privatised rail network is letting Scotland and the north of England down—I should also say north Wales; my apologies for not doing so. What is the economic impact on communities relying on the west coast line? How much badly needed growth in our regional and national economies is being sacrificed at the altar of free market gospel? What opportunities for developing freight and pushing a modal shift from road to rail are being lost and decarbonisation gains unrealised? How much more imbalanced is the UK economy becoming every day that the west coast line remains a shambles?

The Transport Committee heard from Avanti and TransPennine Express yesterday morning. I almost felt sorry for them trying to defend the indefensible—almost. I asked them if they thought that the travelling public believed that they should continue to operate train services. They at least had the good grace to dodge the question rather than admitting that passengers trying to use their services would probably just as soon see the Chuckle Brothers running them as TPE and Avanti. They at least have the excuse that they are only in it to make money. The UK Government have a wider responsibility.

Just six months ago, the then Transport Secretary, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), told the House that his flagship project, Great British Railways, was how

“we are transforming the industry”.—[*Official Report*, 15 June 2022; Vol. 716, c. 318.]

The Chairman of Network Rail now says:

“I have stopped using those three words...it was clearly the invention of Boris Johnson, Andrew Gilligan and Grant Shapps”.

After all the fanfare, all the hype, a contest to decide its headquarters and the Transport Secretary of the time intervening to slap his name on the report that proposed it, GBR is dead in the water before it even began.

Given that the so-called Williams-Shapps review, as I suppose we should technically call it, stated clearly that GBR

“will be the single guiding mind and leader that the railways currently lack”,

one has to ask the question: without GBR, who will be the single guiding mind? Where is the leadership? Perhaps the new Rail Minister, who I get on well with, will be that leading mind. We shall see. The rail network is too important to leave to a Transport Secretary who, in recent weeks, has been a “here today, gone tomorrow” figure. Yet without some kind of arm’s length entity running and controlling our railways, we are doomed to short-termism and a strategy designed to get us through to the end of the latest crisis. Bringing the west coast operations under direct public control, as the Scottish Government have with ScotRail, would be a first step towards a rational and forward-thinking model of ownership and operation.

Scotland’s railway operates at arm’s length from the Government through Transport Scotland, but allows for greater integration with the Government’s political objectives. Even without the devolution of Network Rail, which we have called for in this place many times, the Scottish Government—and, to be fair, previous Scottish Executives under Labour and the Liberal

Democrats—have expanded and transformed rail in Scotland and are still going full steam ahead with a programme of electrification that will, within just over a decade, help to fully decarbonise Scotland’s railway.

As with any public service at a time of economic crisis, there will be issues, but the settlement of disputes with ASLEF and the RMT at ScotRail earlier this year shows that, once again, the apparently radical tactic of Ministers treating trade unions and workers as partners rather than mortal enemies benefits everyone. I commend that approach to Government Members, mainly because it appears to be working. However, we are lucky in Scotland to have decades-long political consensus on how our railway should develop and the powers to make those choices happen.

Robin Millar: I am listening with a great deal of interest to the hon. Member. As he said, there is a lot of consensus in the Chamber. I cannot resist the chance to ask him this: does he think that a strong, integrated, high-performing, decarbonised railway network would inevitably bring all parts of the United Kingdom closer together?

Gavin Newlands: On the face of it, that sounds like a sensible suggestion, but where is that going to come from? There is no evidence from the Department for Transport and the UK Government of that actually happening. Scotland has decarbonised, or electrified, its railways twice as fast as the UK Government for more than 20 years now. There is no urgency about decarbonisation in the UK Government. About 16% of freight trains are still diesel because not enough of the network has been electrified, and that is down to this Government. So I must say to the hon. Gentleman that I do not see that happening any time soon. We are just getting on with it in Scotland.

I realise that my time is short, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I shall wrap up as quickly as I can. Transport for the North has seen its core budget slashed and projects such as Northern Powerhouse Rail trimmed, cut, cancelled or abandoned. TfN has protested every time another proposal for rail in the north has been binned, but ultimately Westminster and Whitehall decide what is best for communities there, and how much cash should be spent there. How can the west coast line have infrastructure and service fit for the future when every penny of expenditure is decided by someone sitting at a desk half a mile from here, rather than by elected Members and civil servants on the ground? How can a line with 20 of its 400 miles south of Watford be fully realised when those along the other 380 miles are seen as irrelevant when it comes to decision making?

Meanwhile, the latest performance statistics show that the gold-plated Elizabeth line—complete with stations costing £695 million, £661 million and £634 million, and an overall price tag of £19 billion—sits at the top as by far the most punctual train operator in the country, and no wonder, given the amount of money that has been ploughed into it. That level of investment in rail in the rest of England would generate huge benefits for the economy outside London and the south-east, but, as we know, anywhere outside the M25 can go to the back of the queue when transport investment is being lined up.

The current crisis on the west coast line may be because of current events, but its origins lie in decades of metropolitan establishment disdain for what are still

[Gavin Newlands]

condescendingly called “the regions”. I am afraid that, unless and until England begins to radically change the way in which it makes decisions about transport policy—decisions that have implications way beyond its borders—the west coast line, like the rest of the rail network outside the M25, will atrophy and continue to be a hindrance rather than a boost to local and national economies. I urge the Secretary of State and his new team to roll up their sleeves like their counterparts in Scotland, get involved in the nitty-gritty rather than leaving it up to private corporations, and then begin the process of putting control over national assets such as the west coast line back into the hands of those who benefit most: the people and communities who rely on them.

3.41 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on securing it. Given that the west coast main line is, in the words of the Minister’s own Department,

“one of our most important rail corridors”,

it was crucial for the House to have the opportunity to discuss the state of the line’s services—or, more accurately, lack of services—on this Government’s watch.

While there are numerous challenges across the line, as we have heard today from one Member after another, the bulk of the issues faced by passengers comes from just two operators. Let us look at suspect No. 1, Avanti West Coast, with 33% of services running on time. That is its current record, and it means two thirds of passengers being left out in the cold on platforms—two thirds of passengers who are late for their commitments or, even worse, never make them; two thirds of passengers who have been let down by Avanti’s shocking rail services. Instead of acknowledging the shortcomings of these operators, the Government have rewarded Avanti’s ongoing failures with a new contract extension, much to the consternation of Conservative Members. That contract was paid for out of the pockets of the very passengers who are being let down by Avanti, again and again.

Figures show that, last year alone, £12 million in dividends was paid to Avanti, the country’s worst-performing operator. Why is that? Why are the Government prepared to make hard-working passengers pay for a service that is delayed or cancelled almost as often as it is on time? One would be forgiven for thinking that having removed thousands of services from its schedules in August, reducing the number of trains between Euston and Manchester Piccadilly from one every 20 minutes to one every hour, Avanti would be capable of producing a more reliable network. Sadly, even expecting that minimal level of service has been wishful thinking. Instead, those who rely on the busiest main line in the country face the reality that one in every eight Avanti west coast trains are cancelled. It is utterly absurd that millions of people, let alone numerous local businesses, cannot rely on these services.

Local metro Mayors have repeatedly raised concerns with the Government about the devastating impact the rail chaos is having on the northern economy, cutting people off from jobs, cutting businesses off

from opportunities and cutting towns off from investment. Rewarding rail operators that obstruct northern growth is a far cry from the Government’s levelling-up agenda, which promised to better connect our towns and cities. The Government’s willingness to reward failure appears to be the common policy choice for west coast main line operating companies.

That brings us on to suspect No. 2: TransPennine Express. Six years ago, TransPennine Express blamed staff shortages, rest day working and driver recruitment for its failing services. Today, it is peddling the same old tired excuses. It therefore comes as no surprise that the Government plan to reward it with an eight-year contract in May. Some may be overly generous and say that the Government are incapable of recognising failure, but when we see how they are managing our public services across the board—from our health services and our schools to our borders—it is clear that they are simply doubling down on their failures and are happy to leave hard-working members of the public to pay the price. The Government have come up with a litany of excuses on behalf of west coast main line operating companies—excuses that do little to reassure those impacted by shambolic services.

Instead of making excuses, the Government should be looking at operators who are getting it right. On the east coast main line, as was explained earlier, more services are being delivered on time, with fewer cancellations. The Government have a responsibility to ensure that Britain’s rail infrastructure rivals that of our global partners. Instead, because of years of Tory failure to properly invest in our network, they have left our country with a second-rate infrastructure and rail services in crisis. To build the rail network that Britain needs, if the Government are not willing to strip franchises, they must at the very least place failing operators on a binding remedial plan to restore services for the British public, with clear penalties that discipline failure, not reward it. The new Rail Minister—the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), for whom I have a great deal of respect, especially in his previous role as Chair of the Transport Committee—has himself admitted that he absolutely sees the urgency of the current situation. If that is the case, why is he not taking urgent, decisive action?

Perhaps now would be a good time for the Minister to also come clean on whether the Transport Secretary is blocking an offer on rest day working that could stabilise rail services in the short term. The spokesman for the SNP, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), highlighted how the Transport Secretary, at the very last minute, torpedoed talks and an agreement that would have prevented strikes, but we shall leave that to debate another day.

The Government have demonstrated time and time again that they cannot be trusted to follow through on their promises, and now Avanti is following suit.

Navendu Mishra: I am often confused, because the Department for Transport often comes across as the public relations department for private rail operators, rather than as a Government Department resolving disputes and their root causes. Does my hon. Friend feel the same?

Mr Dhesi: I thank my hon. Friend for that invaluable point. That is the central point: the Government must work for the people who have elected us, rather than the operators themselves. We owe it to the British people to ensure that they have world-class, quality rail services.

Robin Millar: Does the hon. Gentleman think that the public relations arm of the unions on the Opposition Benches would do a better job?

Mr Dhesi: In the last few months the Labour party have called again and again on Transport Secretaries—we are on our third one, and I have faced one Rail Minister after another and hope that the incumbent will be in his position for a lot longer—to get around the table to resolve these issues. If they had, they would have been long resolved. As was exposed by *The Daily Telegraph*, along with other media, had it not been for the Transport Secretary torpedoing the talks between the rail unions and operators at the last minute by introducing another condition on driver-only trains, the British people would not have had to face train strike action.

In November Avanti promised a full timetable for December, but managed only a 40% increase in services. We have heard cross-party complaints. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn eloquently explained Avanti's repeated broken promises and rip-off rail, as she termed it. She said that Avanti's services have deteriorated even more than before. We have heard about the failures in staff shortages, recruitment and morale—comments underpinned by the ASLEF rail union general secretary, Mick Whelan. This must be the last chance saloon before it is stripped of its franchise and put under the operator of last resort.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) spoke about the damage to Stockport's economy and the region, and how catering roles had been cut significantly. He spoke eloquently about the RMT's "Justice for Cleaners" campaign and how it is unacceptable that so many hard-working rail workers who kept our country moving during the pandemic are now relying on food banks. Shockingly, 84% of rail workers are struggling to make ends meet. He described how the privatised, fragmented franchise model has failed us.

The right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) said that he came here by car because he could not rely on the rail services. He spoke about how since 2019, Avanti has operated deplorably and is incapable of building good relations with its staff. He said that north Wales Conservative MPs wrote to the Minister to ask him not to renew Avanti's franchise. He laments that the Minister says that he is working with Avanti, but he may be flogging a dead horse.

The right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) spoke with considerable experience about how we are all suffering the same fate, especially given that she is a frequent user of this service. She said that, sometimes, not even the guards know whether a train is coming. The hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) spoke about how his constituents are being thoroughly let down. Appallingly, he often has to sit on the floor in his usual spot next to the toilets. He mentioned the accessibility problems faced by disabled passengers.

The hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) spoke about how levelling up is being undermined by the consistent rail fiasco. The hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) saw fit to make biting interventions, but

none the less he spoke about the importance of the line for England, Scotland, and Wales and how we seem to debate poor services on the west coast mainline on a weekly basis—more reliable than Avanti's current services.

When can we expect Avanti to deliver a full service for the north? Will it finally be stripped of the franchise? Finally, on TransPennine Express, can the Minister reassure the House that, given its record of failure, its contract will not be renewed for a further eight years? In the run-up to Christmas, people should be spending time with family and friends, not wasting time on platforms waiting for trains that never turn up. The Government need finally to get a grip.

3.54 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) for securing this important debate on rail transport services to the communities served by the west coast main line. She is a doughty campaigner and advocate for train services in her area. In my short tenure, we have spoken many times, and I know that we will speak more.

I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members who contributed to the debate, who were my right hon. Friends the Members for Tatton (Esther McVey) and for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) and for Delyn (Rob Roberts), and not forgetting the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and my shadow colleagues the hon. Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Slough (Mr Dhesi). I think that I have remembered everybody.

May I start by empathising with all my colleagues and their constituents for the challenges they have all faced on the west coast main line service? I am very sorry about the situation and am determined to see it turned around. I will explain how we will do that, but I owe it to those who have taken part in the debate to explain why the service levels have deteriorated so sharply.

Colleagues whom I have spoken to about this matter in recent weeks have told me that, prior to the summer, the service had been holding up relatively well. Indeed, between 9 January and 1 May, 3% of cancellations were attributed to Avanti. After the end of July, the figure rose to 25%, which is clearly unacceptable. The reason for such a dramatic deterioration can be traced back to the decision on 30 July by many drivers not to work beyond their contracted hours. Let me put that into context and perhaps explain why that may have happened.

A two-year qualified Avanti train driver is paid almost £67,500 and typically works 35 hours over three to four days. To ensure that the railways can operate over a seven-day period, the industry has relied on drivers working additional hours during their rest days. That, in my view—it would also appear to be the view of my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West—has never been a satisfactory means to run our railway, as it relies on good will and means that a train operator cannot put its roster together without drivers volunteering.

On 30 July, as I said, things changed. Avanti experienced an immediate and near total cessation of drivers volunteering to work passenger trains on rest days. More than 90% of drivers who had previously volunteered to work overtime informed Avanti that they would no

[*Huw Merriman*]

longer do so, which would not occur without some level of union organisation. That left Avanti unable to resource its timetable and, in the immediate term, resulted in the significant short-notice cancellations that right hon. and hon. Members have described. Avanti therefore reduced its timetable in response to the withdrawal of rest-day working. Although highly disruptive, it gave passengers a chance to try to make alternative plans. That approach reduced cancellations from about 25% of the service in late-July and August to about 5% this month.

May I now look more towards the future and be more positive as to what we are seeking to deliver? Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn touched on this in her speech. The Department has been working with Avanti to overcome the operational issues. Agreed steps include almost 100 additional drivers entering service, extra trains on its key routes and extended booking options. Avanti is now operating a seven trains per hour timetable amounting to 264 daily train services on weekdays, which is a significant step up from the 180 daily services previously offered during the last six-month period, and more than those offered before the cessation of drivers volunteering to work rest days. Importantly—this is the really important part—the services are not dependent on rest-day working. That is good for Avanti, because it allows the company to put a roster together seven days a week, and it is seemingly good for the 90% of drivers who decided over the summer that they did not wish to work beyond their contracted hours. This timetable change represents an opportunity to put in place a long-term timetable base and to return to the extended booking horizons that passengers rightly expect.

I will touch on one point from the hon. Member for Stockport about catering services. I do not recognise those exact figures, but I will write to him. I have heard many stories where the catering services and the on-board service have just not been good enough, and within that we look to turn it around. He also touched on route knowledge and transferring between operators—a point with which the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North agreed. We completely concur; it takes months of route knowledge to get a driver to be able to travel a route safely.

The Office of Rail and Road and Network Rail have reviewed Avanti's plan and are supportive of the proposition, noting that its full and successful delivery requires agreement with trade unions. The Department is monitoring Avanti's delivery and holding the company to account as appropriate. The new timetable started on Sunday 11 December—Sunday just gone. Alas, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy, we are now in a further period of national industrial action, so it may take time to assess fully the performance of the new timetable. I put on record that I am grateful to all the staff at Avanti who have allowed us to introduce this new timetable.

Many hon. and right hon. Members have inquired about Avanti's contract extension. On 7 October this year, a short-term contract was entered into with the incumbent operator. The contract extends the delivery of the West Coast Partnership and Avanti West Coast business for six months until 1 April 2023. This gives Avanti a clear opportunity to improve its services to the

standards that we and the public expect. The Government will then consider Avanti's performance while finalising a national rail contract for consideration in relation to the route, alongside preparations by the operator of last resort, should it become necessary for the operator to step in at the end of the extension period.

Mr David Jones: Can the Minister say in percentage terms what his expectation is for Avanti being able to deliver a full timetable by the end of March?

Huw Merriman: I cannot, unfortunately, because as things stand we have industrial action. I would be unable to determine even what the service will be like into the first week of January, because there is an expectation when national industrial action takes place that only 20% of services can run, and the day after—a day like today—only 65% can run. Until that industrial action comes down, which I will touch on, I cannot give my right hon. Friend that assurance at all. I call on all parties in this House to call for industrial action to come down.

Mr Jones: I fully understand that we have national rail strikes, but putting that to one side, and focusing on the efforts that Avanti is making and the work that the Minister's Department is doing, what is his expectation in percentage terms that Avanti will deliver a full timetable?

Huw Merriman: My right hon. Friend is experienced in this place, and he will perhaps be aware that I cannot give a percentage. All I can say is that the rail regulator and Network Rail's project management office have reviewed the recovery plan, and they are content, while recognising the challenges that the operator faces, that matters within Avanti's control look to be within its control, and therefore it should be able to roll the timetable out. Indeed, with 100 extra staff and not working on rest-day working practices, Avanti should be confident, and I am confident as well, but I cannot give him a percentage figure, I am afraid; I can just give him my optimism.

Navendu Mishra: Will the Minister give way?

Huw Merriman: I will not, because I want to make some progress, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

My hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North and for Delyn called for the decision to award a short contract to have a "keep options open" status, and they are right to say that. An extension to the contract at this stage will not preclude transferring the contract to the operator of last resort at the end of the extension term.

I will respond to what the hon. Member for Stockport said in exchanges with the hon. Member for Slough, who then brought up the TransPennine Express franchise. I was asked specifically why the Secretary of State was blocking an offer to resolve issues at TPE. I am happy to tell the hon. Member for Stockport that the Secretary of State signed off an offer for rest-day working to be put back to ASLEF on TPE, because that rest-day working agreement was not extended at ASLEF's request at the end of last year. That offer was made, so he will be pleased by the Secretary of State's input, but it was rejected by ASLEF despite being equally the most

generous at time and a half. I will work on the basis that he will call for ASLEF to take a refreshed view on that situation.

That leads me nicely on to workforce reform; my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy both touched on industrial action. The way that passengers use the railway has changed. With more people working at home, we need to ensure that rail is put on a sustainable footing. The railway is losing up to £175 million of revenue each month as a result of fewer passengers post pandemic. That cannot continue. Passengers rightly expect a regular, reliable service seven days a week, but as we have found with Avanti, current shift patterns and voluntary weekend working for railway staff make that vision almost impossible.

Getting stuck in endless disputes will not solve any of that, or bring back the passengers that the railway so badly needs. The only solution is for everyone to come together and agree a new way forward. Contrary to what has been said, the Secretary of State and I have met the trade unions and heard their concerns. We helped to facilitate a fair offer that delivers a pay increase more generous than those in the private sector are gaining and that guarantees no compulsory redundancies. More than a third of RMT members voted to accept Network Rail's proposal, despite being instructed not to. There is clearly an appetite among workers to strike a deal and I welcome today's decision by the Transport Salaried Staffs Association—the second-largest union—to do just that. We urge the RMT to reconsider and to return to the negotiating table with the employers.

We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rebuild a world-leading network. The result will be a thriving rail industry that continues to support Britain's economy and society for generations to come. The hon. Member for Stockport urged me, through the hon. Member for Slough, to get involved. I can tell him that after this debate, I will be sitting down with Mick Lynch from the RMT and the employers to try to facilitate some form of agreement.

Navendu Mishra: The Minister is being generous in giving way. On his point about the workforce, I encourage him to comment on low pay, zero hours and the treatment of cleaning contractors who work on the railway. Inflation is at almost 11% and they deserve fair pay and a decent pension.

Huw Merriman: I will look into that and get back to the hon. Gentleman, because the stories that he shared need investigating. My constituent, who is also on a zero-hours contract, is concerned because every day that the trade unions go on strike on the railways, she loses her wages. She contrasted her wages with some of those taking strike action. I hope that we can work together in that spirit of compromise.

It is vital that we invest in infrastructure in the long term. The Department is investing £54 million to improve the power supply on the west coast main line at Bushey near Watford, which will create additional reliability and support the introduction of new bi-mode rolling stock for use on partially non-electrified routes, such as those in north Wales. In control period 7 between 2024 and 2029, we will invest more than £44 billion in the existing rail network to support Network Rail's operations, maintenance and renewal activity. Network Rail's business planning processes for control period 7 will focus on

how the railway can contribute to long-term economic growth; support levelling up and connectivity; meet customers' needs; and deliver financial sustainability.

As all right hon. and hon. Members have said, the west coast main line is critical to the national network today, but it is also important to the future of the railways. For example, on completion of High Speed 2 phase 2a, new HS2 trains will join the existing west coast main line to create direct services to places including Liverpool, Manchester, Preston, Carlisle and Glasgow.

Turning to the name change, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy has made his pitch. All I can say is that, with a name such as mine, I am very much attracted to the idea, although I am sorry to say that my family came from south Wales rather than north Wales. However, that will not hold back the appetite for work.

Robin Millar: Will the Minister give way?

Huw Merriman: I was about to conclude, but I will.

Robin Millar: I thank the Minister; he is being very generous with his time, and I shall be brief. The reason for the name change is not simply to change the name; it is to reflect the strategic importance of north Wales to the integration of the United Kingdom and everything that flows from that. Does he accept that?

Huw Merriman: I do, and I accept that we are not talking gimmicks here; we are talking about detailed descriptions of what the line actually does, but also about what it can do to enhance the north Wales economy and community. I absolutely do get that.

To conclude, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn and all right hon. and hon. Members for contributing to this important debate. Passengers on the west coast main line have had a torrid time, and we owe it to them to deliver a vastly improved service. The additional drivers, the move away from voluntary working and the new timetable afford the opportunity to turn matters around. I am determined to play my part. I expect Avanti, the unions and everyone connected with this to join me and ensure that this line delivers once again.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): This must be a Christmas miracle. We have had a debate on the west coast main line, and not only was it not cancelled at short notice, but it has not even run late. A miracle indeed! The final word goes to Virginia Crosbie.

4.11 pm

Virginia Crosbie: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank everyone who participated in the debate, everyone in all parties who signed my Backbench Business debate form, and the Backbench Business Committee for supporting this important debate on the west coast main line.

I thank the Minister for his detailed response. I hope that he has heard the message loud and clear. All our constituents deserve a rail service that is not reliant on rest-day working, volunteering and good will. Our railways must work seven days a week. It is vital that the Department for Transport monitors Avanti's delivery and holds Avanti to account.

[Virginia Crosbie]

We need a modern railway where passengers get a reliable timetable, no matter when they travel on Avanti. We need to improve our railways, and we need to attract more passengers so that the industry is on a sound footing going forward. Our constituents deserve to have the service that they pay for and that they expect.

To summarise, it is clear that Avanti offers an appalling service to our constituents. I do not believe that it can turn the service around. For the record, I believe—to use the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones)—that the Government are flogging a dead horse.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered rail transport services for communities served by the West Coast Main Line.

Leisure Centres: Government Support

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

4.13 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak about the important issue of leisure centre provision. As we consider all the sectors struggling with increased bills and financial pressures, we must not forget leisure centres. In many ways, they are something of a Cinderella service even in good times—they are not glamorous and they are taken for granted as spaces where people can meet, socialise, rehabilitate, exercise and, in this bitter weather, keep warm—and, as we all know, we are in anything but good times.

I will speak about my local leisure centres in Warrington, but I first want to set out the national picture, and I am grateful to the Local Government Association for many of the figures that I will use. Councils in England are currently the biggest funder of sport and leisure services and facilities. If we include parks and green spaces, councils currently spend over £1.1 billion a year and are responsible for 2,727 leisure centres, a majority of the UK's 27,000 parks, 31% of grass pitches, 33% of all swimming pools—the majority of publicly accessible pools—20% of health and fitness facilities and 13% of sports halls.

Our councils cannot prioritise leisure centre provision because these centres are not statutory services, and while we all understand the pressures from more acute needs, the swimming pools, sports facilities and community halls that are provided by local authorities are treasured by the public like few other council facilities. Up to and including the past decade of austerity, councils have broadly managed to be self-sustaining for day-to-day leisure spending through fees and other charges, while seeking to subsidise poorer users—in some cases even being able to raise revenues for other council services. They have not, however, had the scope to afford capital expenditure to upgrade buildings, make repairs or improve insulation. As an aside, I say that 68% of sports halls and swimming pools are more than 20 years old, and so are used less by the public than newer facilities.

And then came covid. Despite the Government's support through the national leisure recovery fund, this did not match the significant maintenance and staffing costs that leisure facilities incurred even without the footfall and income that they would usually have. Many councils used their own funds to save facilities from closure and provided £159 million of emergency funding in total, while leisure providers contributed £144 million from their reserves. Following this emergency funding, operators were already financially vulnerable going into the current energy crisis. They now face bills up to 200% higher this year compared with 2019—the last normal operating year—with costs set to grow by up to 240% next year.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): In my constituency, Freedom Leisure works alongside the local authority to deliver services, and it was able to upgrade as a result. It was really tough during covid. I met Jeremy Rowe, its operations director, and he told me that in Wales alone there is a £3.3 million uplift in energy costs. The figure for Swansea is £1.4 million. Does my hon. Friend agree that the loss of these vital community assets could devastate our local communities?

Charlotte Nichols: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an important point. As I will come on to, we cannot put a pounds-and-pence figure on the value of leisure centre provision locally and what it means to our communities, and particularly our most vulnerable residents. That is why this debate is so important, and I am grateful that she has come to support it.

In October, ukactive research found that 40% of council areas are at risk of losing their leisure centres or seeing reduced services at their leisure centres before 31 March 2023. Three quarters—74%—of council areas are classified as “unsecure”, which means there is a risk of leisure centres closing and/or reducing services before 31 March 2024.

The LGA believes that, without Government intervention, large numbers of public sector leisure facilities are unlikely to make it through to next spring, with service restrictions and facility closures already growing. As the voice of local government, the Local Government Association has called for discussion of a number of measures to address the immediate financial pressures: an in-year grant with an increase to the local government settlement from 2023-24 to ringfence and protect public leisure facilities; an immediate review of sector taxation and regulation that minimises other outgoing costs, with longer-term business tax reform to collectively support the sustainability and growth of the sector; and support for a move to non-carbon-intensive heating methods, including opening up existing capital funding programmes to ensure that new build facilities are eligible for support, improving energy efficiency for the future, while also ensuring that they meet the needs and expectations of future communities, encouraging them to be active. I hope that the Minister will take all those on board, and confirm that he is engaging with the LGA on these specific points to save our leisure centres.

I want to turn now to our leisure services in Warrington, provided by LiveWire. At this point, I should declare an interest, in that I rent my constituency office from Warrington Leisure and Library Trust at commercial rates—I am not sure whether that is strictly declarable, but I wanted to flag it up. The building my office is in, the Orford Jubilee Neighbourhood Hub, also houses our local gym, pool, library and other services, such as the pharmacy, Macmillan Cancer Support and even a Subway—which I spend far too much of my money in on the days I am in my office, but I digress.

LiveWire is an employer of more than 352 people in Warrington, delivering leisure, library and lifestyles services that attract more than 422,000 visits from local residents per quarter and make a vital contribution to the health and wellbeing of the community. LiveWire operates three neighbourhood hubs, two leisure centres, one community hub and 13 libraries. It is important to note here that it has been managing those services in Warrington since May 2012 as a community interest company. That means that it is designed to re-invest in services and facilities; it is not a private business, it does not have shareholders and it does not own any assets that it can leverage bank loans against. It is therefore specifically vulnerable to the economic storm that we face.

As LiveWire has noted in a letter to me:

“Our income-generating activities underpin discounted access to many health programmes—such as rehabilitation, prehabilitation and preventative services—to some of the poorest and most in need of support. Services that would not be operated in a market driven solely on a for-profit basis.”

Now, due to increased energy costs, higher than budgeted pay awards for staff, a lack of customers returning post covid, customer cancellations because they have less disposable income due to the massively increased cost of living, and increased prices for raw materials and services, LiveWire tells me that its expenditure has increased by £2.3 million compared with 2021, which is not sustainable. It is at serious risk of being unable to operate after March 2023 without financial support, despite increased demand for swimming and aquatics activity, for example.

I have already written to the Chancellor about this situation, and would like to repeat LiveWire’s plea to this Minister today. First, charitable trusts and community interest companies should be named as a vulnerable sector in January’s energy review, with support offered beyond March 2023. Secondly, any future cap should be more generous than the current cap, which still resulted in significant losses for CICs such as LiveWire.

I am very aware of the demands on the public purse, but I also note the role that this sector plays in keeping the public healthy. We all know that preventive healthcare is far cheaper than later interventions, and these facilities in the heart of our communities, which subsidise getting fit and keeping healthy for people who need it most, are truly vital. Swim England states that swimming alone saves the NHS more than £357 million every year, and the contribution to the nation’s mental health will be enormous.

We have a chronic lack of long-course pools across the country, and it is tragic to think that access even to our short-course pools could be even further curtailed. Swimming is a vital life skill, especially in communities such as mine, which have rivers and canals running through them—it saves lives. It is also a vital skill for participation in other sports, especially rowing, which we are trying to make more inclusive and accessible in Warrington, through the incredible work of Warrington Youth Rowing and the Warrington Rowing Club.

When we consider all the sports and activities that our leisure sector supports, including things such as self-defence classes for women and classes catered specifically towards our more elderly residents, we see how much of a loss it would be to our communities if these became less accessible to, or priced out, those who benefit from them the most. Public participation in public leisure fell by 35% between April 2021 and January 2022. It would be a false economy to let this sector flounder and close. I want to hear from the Minister and the Government what they will be doing to help it through this most difficult time, for all our sakes.

4.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): I am pleased to respond to this debate and I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) for securing it. The contributions that we have heard across the Chamber show the importance that this House places on the provision of good-quality public leisure facilities, and I think all hon. Members will agree that those spaces are vital to allowing people, wherever they may be in the country, to participate in sport and to lead an active lifestyle.

Hon. Members have spoken in this debate of the challenges faced by their own local leisure centres, gyms and swimming pools. The most significant challenge is

[*Stuart Andrew*]

the rises in energy costs, further to the abhorrent Russian invasion of Ukraine, but there are other challenges with inflation, as the hon. Lady mentioned, the ability to keep qualified and dedicated staff and shortages of pool-cleaning chemicals. While a number of facilities are facing similar problems, no two are exactly the same—just as no two constituencies are the same, I guess.

The leisure sector as a whole has a wide range of stakeholders and operating models, encompassing providers from across the public, private and civil society sectors such as the community interest company in the hon. Lady's constituency. Local authorities will choose the model that works best for them as part of their consideration of how they can best deliver their services for local communities.

In times such as these, I recognise that local authorities are having to make difficult decisions about which services to protect. I remind the House that leisure provision is not a statutory service for local authorities and, as such, may be deprioritised when it comes to setting budgets for the next year. However, I urge my colleagues in local government to consider the essential services that those facilities provide for their communities, because I firmly believe that public leisure facilities provide so much in the way of positive opportunities and benefits to those communities.

Charlotte Nichols: In my own area in Warrington, the funding available from central Government has been cut by about 60% over the last 10 years, which means that approximately 70% of the council's spending is on statutory services, particularly things such as adult social care. Clearly, those cannot be cut back on, and we expect the proportion of council spending spent on statutory services will only rise, as an ageing population will have more complex health needs. While I appreciate what the Minister says, that leisure facilities cannot be prioritised since they are not a statutory service but that he encourages councils to do all they can to support them, does he not agree that councils are being put in a difficult position, and that without additional public support and finance, they are fundamentally not able to do that?

Stuart Andrew: I recognise those challenges. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced the additional support for local authorities in the recent autumn statement, and I hope that will help in these challenging circumstances.

I was referring to the positive opportunities and the benefits that leisure centres provide. I am sure hon. Members are aware that we have very high levels of inactivity in this country, as the hon. Lady mentioned, with almost one third of adults—more than 12 million people—classed as inactive. On top of that, 2.2 million, or 30%, of children are inactive.

While the figures show some signs of improvement post pandemic, we know that more work needs to be done to target the long-term inactive and make sure everyone can receive the benefits that being active brings. We will be publishing our sporting strategy, which will outline how we intend to do that, in the new year. A key part of that strategy will be making sure that people throughout the country, from Carlisle to Cornwall and

west London to Warrington, have access to the right facilities for them to get active and feel part of their community.

That is why public leisure centres and facilities are so important: they provide a wide range of opportunities to be physically active—badminton, swimming or even Zumba—at low cost, and in doing so they become hubs for the community, places to meet and to make new friends and new social connections. They also offer jobs and volunteering opportunities to the communities they are in, and the hon. Lady gave a good example of the benefits those centres bring.

Why is this access to sport and physical activity so important? It is proven that regular activity genuinely helps to avoid a range of health issues, whether physical or mental, and that eases the pressure on our NHS. It helps to bring communities closer together, and gives young people essential leadership and teamwork skills. We know that sport works. I know from my own personal experience, when I do get the chance to go to the gym, that it is a great opportunity to reset and refresh, and hopefully that helps me to do my job in a better way.

Speaking to staff at my local facilities, and through conversations with people across the sector, I know that the sport and fitness sector has endured challenging times over the past few years. During the pandemic, the Government prioritised access to sport. We encouraged people to get out once a day for a walk. We worked with gyms to make sure they could reopen safely. In addition, we provided the £100 million national leisure recovery fund, which was part of more than £1 billion of support to the sport sector to ensure its survival.

On top of that, we continue to invest heavily in sport and physical activity through our arm's-length body, Sport England, which receives over £100 million a year in Exchequer funding, along with over £200 million from the players of the National Lottery. We are continuing to support the sector now as we face the challenges of increased energy costs. Our energy bill relief scheme has limited energy costs for swimming pools, leisure centres, gyms and sports clubs throughout the country to half of what they could have been with wholesale prices as they are. That support will continue over the winter until March next year.

Charlotte Nichols: On a point of clarification, I asked what support would be available beyond March 2023, because a lot of leisure centres look as if they will not be able to survive after that cliff edge. I know the Minister will not be able to make a financial commitment today, but is he having conversations with the Treasury about the continuance of a scheme of that kind, in the hope that that support might continue beyond March 2023?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady rightly predicts that I cannot make a financial statement here—my colleagues in the Treasury would be extremely angry with me if I did—but I will come on in a moment to some of the work we are doing.

We have also provided business rates relief for those providing these essential services in the private sector, which will remain in place until March 2024. Throughout the implementation of the energy bill relief scheme, officials in my Department and I have been working closely with partners in the sector, such as ukactive, and

with colleagues in local government, such as the Local Government Association, to monitor the scheme's impact and make sure that we are fully aware of the situation facing the leisure sector. Their feedback and the insights they have been providing and sharing with us are so important for ensuring that support can be continued where it is needed most. I take this opportunity to thank them all, as well as the staff at Sport England who have supported us with the review.

The energy bill relief scheme has been under review over the last months, and officials in my Department have engaged with colleagues in Treasury to make sure we have made the strongest case possible for further support. Outside of that energy review, the Department is continuing to review how best we can support the provisions of leisure centres across the country. That includes ongoing engagement with our partners in the

public, private and civil society sectors, and across Government, and we will continue to make sure that we support those essential services every way we can. As I have said throughout my speech, I recognise the huge benefit that those services provide to our communities, to the health of the nation and, ultimately, to many of the services that Government provide. I thank the hon. Lady again for bringing this important matter to the Floor of the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I hope we are going to see the Minister's Christmas tie on either Monday or Tuesday next week.

Question put and agreed to.

4.34 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 15 December 2022

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Eye Health

1.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered a blueprint for eye health in England and the devolved nations.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling this debate. The hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) was going to be here, but she has a funeral to attend. As she is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment, her contribution would be significant. The funeral was at half-past twelve, so it is probably ending about now, and she said she would try to get here. Her contribution to this debate would be of significance to all of us here, particularly the Minister.

I also thank the Eyes Have It partnership, which includes the Royal College of Ophthalmologists, the Macular Society, the Royal National Institute of Blind People, the Association of Optometrists, Fight for Sight and Roche, for its support. The name of the group is my favourite of all the names. The work that the group does is incredible. What could be better for a Westminster Hall debate in the House of Commons than the Eyes Have It? When the eyes have it, that means we are on the right road. I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. My staff have been in touch with him, so he will have a fair idea of what we are trying to achieve.

I am also pleased to see the Labour spokesperson, the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), who brings much knowledge from her own personal job to the debate. I look forward to her contribution. I also welcome the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) from the Scots Nats. We speak in all these debates, and it is hard to find a margin of difference between the two of us when it comes to our proposals—indeed, between the three of us.

I thank the Minister for his presence. I know the issues raised will be heard and acted on, which is what we want in these debates—a responsive Minister with a good ear to listen and to grasp the issues, which I know he does, and build on what we say. I am ever mindful that health is a devolved matter, so my contribution to a blueprint for eye health in England and the devolved nations will be from a Northern Ireland perspective. I know the Minister will respond specifically to what we have here on the mainland. The spokesperson for the Scots Nats will add her knowledge from Scotland. I like to hear the contributions from our Scottish colleagues because they have a health system and an eye care system that might be the envy of many of us.

Today's debate seeks to build on the previous debate, held in January 2022, on eye health and macular disease. It was a Tuesday morning debate, so probably more amenable to those who wanted to attend. Sometimes on

a Thursday afternoon, when there are difficulties with trains and suchlike, the people who could be here are not. Since the debate in January 2022, some good things have happened. NHS England has appointed its first national clinical director for eye care. At the same time, England has established integrated care systems, which empower local areas to increasingly shape their healthcare provision. What has been done therefore has a local, community impact.

At present, every nation of the United Kingdom except England has some form of eye care plan, whether it is self-contained or part of a wider strategy. I am sure that the Minister will give us his thoughts on that. However, the content and focus of the plans vary significantly, as I am sure we will hear from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Tooting. Additionally, policy progress has often been fragmented, and what planning guidance there is for services in England does not contain longer-term ambitions or measures for improvement. I hope that the debate will perhaps outline another, stronger direction. If we can do that, the debate will have highlighted what we want it to highlight.

A plan for England would empower the NCD by providing a framework that enables effective oversight of ICSs without undermining local autonomy. It would create a shared long-term vision that encompasses primary, secondary and community care, and that future-proofs services. If we can achieve that, we will have done well. At the same time, it could provide a basis for increased alignment between nations, and I hope that the Minister will give us some pointers on how to address this issue better together. The fact that I always make this point does not weaken it: we can learn how to do better from all the regions. By doing better for one—England, for example—we can improve the situation for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. If we can do that, that would be good news.

Over 2 million people in the United Kingdom are living with a condition that can cause sight loss, such as glaucoma, cataracts, macular disease or diabetic retinopathy. Some 340,000 people in the United Kingdom are registered as blind or partially sighted, and 50% of UK sight loss is thought to be preventable. I say this honestly and with deep respect to everyone here, including the Minister: if we can prevent sight loss by doing early checks in opticians and GPs' surgeries, that would be good. If we cannot, we will leave people with sight loss for the rest of their lives.

I often think that, of all our senses, eyesight would be the hardest to lose. If I did not have the ability to hear, at least I would have vision, which colours everyday life as it goes by; losing eyesight becomes more and more difficult to handle. If 50% of UK sight loss is thought to be preventable, what is being done to prevent it? Members will know that sight loss affects people in many ways, but it is clear to everyone here that the impact of sight loss is profound for individuals, as well as their friends and families.

The Royal National Institute of Blind People once asked me to do a walk around Hollywood with guide dogs, which I was more than glad to do. That gave me a better understanding of what it means to have sight loss. I put a black mask over my eyes; I could see no light whatsoever. I had a guide dog that I had never met, and the guide dog did not know me. That guide dog stayed at my right knee, and guided me up the Hollywood

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street, which was full of shoppers, and I got a perspective on having sight loss. The dog took me where it wanted me. It stopped on the footpath before crossing the road. That left an indelible impression of what it means to be blind and what we must do to help. I thank Guide Dogs for all that it does. We all respond to the adverts on TV, and many of us in this debate, and outside of this House, probably contribute to the charity, so that someone else can have a dog as their companion and guide.

Choices made about the provision of eye care can change the trajectory of a person's life. The experience of sight loss can often be similar to bereavement, inspiring feelings of denial, anger and fear. The impact of sight loss is also felt beyond individuals and their families. In England, the data is most readily available; it is always good to have the data, because it gives us the possibility of establishing a strategy and a way forward. In England, ophthalmology is the single biggest out-patient speciality, with over 7.5 million attendances at ophthalmology out-patient services in 2021.

Recent calculations show that eye conditions cost the UK economy some £25.2 billion per year, a figure expected to rise to £33.5 billion per year by 2050, and 84% of the economic costs of sight loss lie outside the health and social care system. Again, Minister, how best can we draw sight loss within the health and social care system, to ensure that the delivery of treatment for people with sight loss is achieved in a positive fashion?

A range of pressures contribute to what is now a capacity crisis in eye care. Over recent years, demand for eye care services has increased, driven by an ageing population, with people rightly concerned about losing their sight; if we can prevent that, then we will have achieved much. However, such concern can lead to unnecessary referrals, increasing pressure on services. A recent Moorfields study found that 52% of patients referred for specialist assessment did not need specialist treatment.

There are also significant workforce pressures. In 2018, the Royal College of Ophthalmologists identified a shortfall of 230 consultants and 204 staff and associate specialist ophthalmologists. That situation is predicted to get worse, so again I ask the Minister: what can be done to retain the number of staff, and indeed increase their number?

These structural factors have been combined with severe disruption to services due to the pandemic, making it harder for services to implement innovations that could mitigate growing demand. As a result, there are significant ophthalmology backlogs across the United Kingdom and indeed in Northern Ireland as well. Some patients are now waiting six months or longer to access eye care services. With great respect, I believe that situation really needs to improve. Eyesight can be saved if waiting times for appointments are shortened. Back home, I am aware of some people whose appointments were delayed and unfortunately in that short time they lost their sight.

In England, 641,000 people were waiting for specialist eye treatment as of October 2022, accounting for some 9.2% of the NHS waiting list and 1.1% of the entire population of England. In Scotland, ophthalmology accounts for 12.2% of waiting lists; in Wales, the figure is 11.9%; and in Northern Ireland it is 9.9%.

In my constituency of Strangford, the local health and social care trust is the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. As of 30 June 2022, 49% of patients waiting for ophthalmology out-patient treatment in the South Eastern HSCT have been waiting longer than 18 weeks. We need to shorten that and I have been in touch with the Minister back home—Robin Swann, who by the way is a very responsive Minister—to see how we can cut down that waiting period of 18 weeks.

According to figures for Northern Ireland from the Office for National Statistics, almost 18,000 patients were waiting for ophthalmology services. Of those, over 9,000 ophthalmology patients—about 55%—were waiting more than 52 weeks for a first consultant-led out-patient appointment. That situation is the reason why people have lost their sight and it really has to be improved. In total, 82% were waiting over nine weeks. Again, it is very clear that something has to be done. It is not the Minister's responsibility—I know that—but I am just putting the facts on the record in *Hansard* because I think that there are many issues for us to address, including back home.

Evidence suggests that the mega-clinics are making some progress on cataract surgery waiting times. My own mother is 91 and she has had one of her cataracts done. She was treated on Tuesday and she made the appointment for the second cataract. This treatment will definitely improve my mum's vision greatly, as well as her participation in life. She may be 91, but she is still a formidable lady. She has a deep interest in all that happens in the world, including in the political things that happen here; no doubt, she will want to watch this debate as well to find out what has been said.

The figures for cataract surgery waiting times are deeply troubling, and the impact on patients' lives, including their physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing, continues to be significant. It is my belief that the next Assembly or Executive should prioritise addressing waiting times for treatment in Northern Ireland by investing in and expanding the use of timely, targeted interventions, such as mega-clinics and community-based care and support. A greater use should be made of accessible patient communication to address waiting times and treatment delays.

Treatment delays can have a significant impact. Up to 22 people per month experience severe or permanent sight loss due to delays to follow-up care. A national plan for eye care is needed to address the capacity crisis and ensure everybody can access the care they need at the right time and in the right place. Ultimately, that would prevent avoidable sight loss, which would be a massive step forward.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have some form of eye care plan, but they vary in scope, focus and content. The Eyes Have It identified four key areas that the national plan should address. The workforce should be expanded to ensure the NHS has the skills it needs now and in the future. Ophthalmology training should be expanded, and optometrists and multi-disciplinary eye care teams should be enabled to work at the top of their licences. In other words, there should be a focus on them.

New technologies, such as digital remote monitoring and remote triage, should be used to ensure the care delivered is efficient, prioritises those with the greatest needs and fits around patients' lives. If we can do that, we will have achieved much.

There should be research into the future of treatment to better understand sight loss, and that should be translated into innovative treatments that enable more people to keep their sight. That has to be a central goal of what we are trying to achieve. The uptake of innovative treatments will improve patient outcomes, prevent the deterioration of sight and reduce the burden of care on the families impacted. We need to address them, too.

The national plan can support systems to ensure that patients access the right care at the right time. That would reduce unnecessary referrals and, ultimately, the pressure on NHS eye care services. A national plan would also help to improve the integration of all levels of community and hospital eye services. It is important that community and hospital eye services are married as one so they can do better. That would enable new integrated care systems to deliver care that is joined up, works for patients and local communities, and supports national oversight. In other words, the strategy starts here and works its way down to communities, councils and all the other systems.

It is of course right that the nations of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can develop healthcare services that meet the needs of their own populations. I understand that, but a well-designed plan for one nation can provide a valuable blueprint for others, supporting all nations to improve their eye care services and prevent more avoidable sight loss.

I am my party's health spokesperson, which is why I am involved in all health debates and why I secured this debate, along with the hon. Member for Battersea. The cancer strategy in England provides a helpful guide for the structure of a well-built, potentially successful national plan. NHS England's national cancer transformation board publishes an implementation plan for the strategy, and there is a commitment to a £200 million cancer transformation fund.

There are yearly progress updates from NHS England. Alongside its principles, the strategy for cancer details the current landscape in cancer care and sets out ambitions and performance metrics, rather than measuring progress. At the end, it sets out practical recommendations for transformation: improving the experiences of care, treatment and support, improving the efficiency of delivery, and driving implementation and cost savings. Costs are a part of no matter what we do nowadays, and we should make cost savings as long as there is no detriment to the service. Those will be key components of a national eye care plan that tackles the big issues while proposing specific metrics and making recommendations for policymakers.

As highlighted by Professor Kathryn Saunders, the division head of optometry in Ulster University back home, a blueprint for each nation would need to address eye health inequalities, and not just those of a geographical nature. We must ensure that there is more equitable access to eye care among the different communities and populations that are at a significantly increased risk of having a sight problem but may not be accessing NHS sight tests, such as people who are homeless, people with dementia—I make a special plea for them—and children and adults with learning disabilities.

The charity SeeAbility has highlighted the wonderful work of Professor Saunders and the issue of eye care inequality. Some people in the Gallery today are directly

involved, and I am pleased to see them here. I am also very pleased that they passed information through to us. Professor Saunders has said:

“I'm sorry to say that not enough action on these inequalities is happening. I'm even sorrier to say that even a service currently offered in special schools appears under threat.”

We need to marry things up better. She continued:

“NHS England will not say what happens after 31 March 2023 to the NHS Special Schools Eye Care Service. It started last year and has reached 83 special schools so far supporting over 9000 children.”

I commend the pilot scheme promoted by the Government and the NHS. It has done much—it is a success story—but I seek assurance that the special schools eye care service will continue beyond March 2023. That evidence-based, inclusive service was celebrated globally last year on World Sight Day, and it was a first for the UK, with Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland watching closely. It was established by the NHS on the premise that children with learning disabilities are 28 times more likely to have a sight problem but struggle to access sight tests or glasses.

The evidence is compelling. Half of children in special schools have a sight problem, yet only four in 10 have ever had a sight test. What can we do to improve that? I would be pleased if the Minister gave us some indication of what could be done, ever mindful that two Departments probably need to be approached to ensure that it takes place. I am pleased that research from Ulster University has provided evidence to support the benefits of in-school eye care for this vulnerable group. We are moving towards that strategy for Northern Ireland, which is positive, demonstrating that that model of eye care has educational benefits as well as positive impacts on vision.

If the service is to be scaled back or abandoned, what will happen to the 9,000 children in a few months' time? I do not think that we can ignore the good work that has been achieved. Surely the intention is not for them to return to overstretched hospital clinics. We must do better. If there was ever an example of the need for joined-up strategic thinking on eye care, surely this is it. I ask the Minister the question that Professor Saunders asked me to pose: will he take action to ensure that NHS England does not close the service without proper consultation? There is real good here, and it is important that we have the opportunity to see it continue.

This is a slightly different point, but it is related to eye care in England and the devolved nations. The Older Drivers Task Force sent me some information and was keen to feed into the process, so it is important that we record that. Only the UK uses the ability to read a vehicle number plate at a set distance—20 metres—to assess someone's visual fitness to drive at their first licence application, with no further requirement for visual assessments. The UK's reliance on the number plate test has been widely criticised as not fit for purpose. Not only is it a crude measure of visual acuity, but, according to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency in 2021, many motorists are unaware of that requirement for driving.

There have been recent calls for vision checks, such as evidence of a recent sight test, to be introduced at licence application and renewal every 10 years. Those calls are in accordance with the Department for Transport's “Road Safety Statement 2019”, which stated that consideration was being given to having a mandatory

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sight test at age 70 and at three-year intervals thereafter, to coincide with licence renewal. The covid pandemic has slowed things up, and we have lost two or three years of progress in the NHS and many spheres of life, but I am keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on this issue. There is evidence of strong support from older drivers—those aged 60 and over—for compulsory eyesight testing when renewing a licence. The over-60s are entitled to free sight tests, so such a requirement would be at no cost to those drivers. If there is no cost, it seems to be a win-win, so let us do that.

The Older Drivers Task Force recommended the introduction of mandatory eyesight testing, with an optometrist or an ophthalmic or medical practitioner providing an “MOT” of a driver's eyesight at licence renewal at the age of 70, and at subsequent renewals. Should that be implemented, the NHS contract for free eyesight tests would need to be amended so that drivers aged 70 and above could have a more detailed “MOT” sight test. That is the request of the Older Drivers Task Force, and I believe it would benefit those in that age group who drive and everyone on the road.

The covid pandemic has had a very negative effect on the visual health of the nation. In September 2020, the Eyecare Trust announced that an estimated 5 million routine eye tests had been missed. With subsequent lockdowns and restrictions, the situation has since worsened, which raises serious concerns for road safety, as the UK licensing system relies on drivers being responsible for ensuring that they meet the visual standards for driving. The pandemic has led to long waiting times for patients referred for assessment and treatment of DVLA-notifiable sight conditions. While they wait, they may continue to drive even though their condition may be deteriorating, jeopardising both their safety and that of other road users, so there is a practical reason for this request.

Delays to cataract surgery—my mum, who has been on the waiting list for three years, had her first cataract surgery some three months ago, with the second to come shortly—have been identified as a particular concern. It is difficult to quantify the crash risk of visually impaired drivers, as data is not routinely collected. However, according to the College of Optometrists, a recent analysis of contributing factors recorded in STATS19 showed an association between visual impairment and injury collisions for drivers aged 60 and over. An earlier study by the Road Safety Authority estimated that some 2,000 drivers in the UK were involved in accidents in 2013 due to poor vision, causing nearly 3,000 casualties.

The recommendations made by the Older Drivers Task Force are quite simple, but I believe that they are very practical and helpful. It calls for a change in the way that visual standards for fitness to drive are assessed and monitored for all drivers, but particularly for those aged 60 and over. It recommends that the number plate test should be replaced with a standardised measure of visual acuity plus an assessment of visual fields, contrast sensitivity and twilight vision. In other words, we should test both night and day driving; I think that is important for licence renewals. The Older Drivers Task Force also repeats its recommendation to introduce mandatory eyesight testing and to provide an “MOT” of driver eyesight at licence renewal at the age of 70, and at subsequent renewals.

I will conclude by giving a couple of examples of the importance of people visiting their optician regularly. I know of two people in my constituency who have been affected by this issue. One lady was having headaches and went to see her optician, who checked her and found a growth, which turned out to be a tumour. He sent her to the Ulster Hospital, which is just up the road from Newtownards in my constituency. Ultimately, the lady was hospitalised and had an operation. Opticians, and regular attendance, can save people's lives.

A good friend of mine had not been feeling well for some time. He came in on a Monday to see me in the office before I came over here for work. He said, “I haven't been well.” I looked at him and said, “You look very pale and have lost a bit of weight.” He replied, “Jim, I've had sore heads for almost three weeks.” He was going to see his optician that day. As a result of the eye test, the optician diagnosed a tumour or growth. My friend was told to go to the Ulster Hospital immediately and, within two days, he had an operation to remove a tumour the size of a tennis ball. It is hard to comprehend such things. I tell those two stories because they are examples of how regular check-ups with opticians save people's lives.

In conclusion—I have said that already, but I really will conclude with this—eye care services across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are facing significant pressures, with implications for individuals, the NHS and the wider economy. Developing a national plan for eye care will help tackle the capacity crisis in eye care in England and provide a blueprint to share good practice across the United Kingdom, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

I thank you, Mr Sharma, and I thank the Minister for his time. I also thank the two shadow Ministers, who will speak shortly. I have not read their speeches, but I suspect that we will all be on the same page, asking for the same thing. We look to the Minister to respond in a positive fashion.

2.1 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for the nice things he said about me and congratulate him on securing this important debate. He is right: people would have been present if it had been possible, but weather, transport and other emergencies intervened.

Eye problems can affect anyone at any age. It is important that people get their eyes tested regularly. In Scotland, we feel that that should be by having a free NHS-funded eye examination. It is easy for us to neglect our eyes, because often they do not hurt when there is a problem. Having our eyes examined regularly can help to detect early signs of sight-threatening conditions and other serious health conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure, in addition to the conditions that the hon. Member for Strangford told us about a moment ago.

In Scotland, community optometrists are the first contact point for any eye problems. They can diagnose and treat a number of conditions without the patient requiring an appointment with their GP or an ophthalmologist. An increasing number of community optometrists are registered independent prescribers and can issue patients with an NHS prescription to treat their eye problem.

The Scottish Government intend to expand further the range of eye care services delivered in the community by investing in a shared electronic patient record and in accredited practitioner training. That will include the management of stable glaucoma and treated ocular hypertension patients, and a national low vision service for visually impaired people. The Minister should probably have a look at that.

The Scottish Government also have a national ophthalmology workstream on hospital eye services, which sets out how they manage the delivery of hospital eye care services to provide timely care for patients. Patients with ophthalmic conditions are often vulnerable and must be supported by a responsive health service. Their care should primarily be safe and timely.

In Scotland, the Government are committed to improving services for sensory impaired people through their See Hear strategy. Adults and children with a sensory impairment should expect seamless provision of assessment, care and support, and the same access to employment, education, leisure, healthcare and social care as anyone else. In 2017, NHS Education for Scotland carried out an independent review of low vision service provision across Scotland.

In contrast to England and Wales, the Scottish Government provide free, universal, NHS-funded eye examinations, which is really important, especially given the cost of living. Universal access to healthcare is one of the Scottish Government's key priorities, which is why free eye examinations for all were introduced in Scotland in 2006. Anyone, from any background, is able to access free eye care to help reduce the risk of sight loss. That includes all people in Scotland who are UK resident, refugees, asylum seekers and some eligible overseas visitors. Appointments are available every two years, and people are able to attend an optometrist for an NHS-funded examination of any eye problem that arises between times, including emergencies.

I was a beneficiary of that system. My eye started to fail and I found it very difficult to carry on my work, especially here in Westminster Hall, when I could not read the screens properly unless I was sitting very close to them. I went to my local optometrist. She checked my eyes and discovered cataracts, and immediately put me on a path for treatment, which really helped. When the same thing happened in my other eye, I was able to go back between appointments and say, "Look, I think there's a problem. Can you help?" Again, I was put on a treatment path. I now have two artificial lenses—one in each eye, as my late father would have said. I have really benefited from that system, as have many people in Scotland.

If someone is unable to travel unaccompanied because of a physical or mental illness or disability, they can arrange to have a home visit quite easily. In fact, I walk from my house to my son's house every week, and there are posters on railings across the roundabout that I have to go by, telling people that they can have that service. That is hugely important because, often, it is as people get older and more vulnerable—I put myself in that category some days—that they benefit from free eye care.

Those on benefits such as employment and support allowance, jobseeker's allowance, pension credit, universal credit, working tax credit or child tax credit, and children under 16 years old, are entitled to help with the cost of

glasses or contact lenses, and the repair or replacement of glasses or contact lenses, in the form of an NHS optical voucher.

In Scotland, before a child starts primary school, they will be offered a vision screening appointment as part of the See4School programme. That helps children begin school with the best possible vision and helps provide for any long-term visual problems. My daughter only discovered she had eye issues when she was learning to play a musical instrument and could not read the music from where she had to stand. If she had been screened earlier, it is possible that she would not have needed glasses for her whole life, as she does now.

In Scotland, we believe that socioeconomic inequalities drive health inequalities. That is why the Scottish Government are acting to mitigate the impact of austerity and reduce inequality. Where we have public health issues, Scottish Government public health efforts are complemented by wide-ranging cross-Government action. That is where Scotland benefits from being a small country. It is much easier to work in partnership and get cross-governmental things done.

We know that the worst health outcomes are driven to a significant extent by deprivation. That is why the Scottish Government are committed to addressing the underlying causes of health inequalities and to ending poverty; increasing access to fair employment, education and training; and improving our physical and social environments. That whole-systems approach and cross-Government action is needed to improve equity for Scotland's people and communities. I believe that is true right across the four nations of the United Kingdom. That will be achieved by focusing efforts on the determinants of health inequalities and working more effectively in partnership. Reducing poverty and inequality sits at the heart of the SNP Scottish Government's investment across all portfolios, and is a key driver of their development of a wellbeing economy that will have the needs of each individual at its core. The wellbeing economy is now becoming a recognised way of improving not just health, but everything around health and the lives of a nation's people.

We believe that prescription charges are a tax on ill health and a barrier to better health for many. Charging for prescriptions would mean that many people with chronic conditions, or even those receiving treatment for cancer, could be liable. The Scottish Government continue to demonstrate their commitment to the provision of free healthcare advice and treatment when needed, with the introduction of the NHS Pharmacy First service, which is available in all community pharmacies to everyone registered with a GP or ordinarily resident in Scotland.

The Scottish Government are keen to support people to make healthier lifestyle choices that help take care of their eyes. I do not think many people realise that giving up smoking helps, because smokers are much more likely to develop age-related macular degeneration—the most common cause of sight loss in the UK—and cataracts than non-smokers. Given that smoking is more prevalent in the most deprived communities, the Scottish Government have set specific targets for cessation services focused on those communities. They provide £9.1 million a year to health boards to fund smoking cessation services targeted at achieving successful 12-week quits for 1.5% of the adult population in the most deprived areas. Through all of that, the Scottish

[*Marion Fellows*]

Government will ensure a “done by communities, for communities” approach, making sure that lived experience is central to their work.

The Scottish Government are also keen that people drink within the recommended limits, because heavy alcohol consumption may increase the risk of developing early age-related macular degeneration. The alcohol framework sets out the priorities for preventing alcohol-related harm. We consulted on potential restrictions on alcohol advertising and promotion in 2022 to protect children and young people. The Scottish Government have twice run their “count 14” campaign work to raise awareness of the UK chief medical officer’s lower-risk drinking guidelines of 14 units per week. It was run for four weeks in March 2019 and over six weeks in January to March 2020. They are exploring the evidence around managed alcohol programmes and are delighted to be able to contribute to the running of the model being piloted in Glasgow by Simon Community Scotland and its evaluation. Of course, making alcohol more expensive in Scotland, especially the kinds of drinks that young people in particular used to drink, has also helped. In the end, it will help their eye health as well.

Will the Minister look at what we are doing in Scotland? I am sure he has a very good idea. It is really important. Will he tell us what he hopes will happen in England?

In conclusion, it is really important that there is a blueprint, as the hon. Member for Strangford said. In Scotland we do things differently, but we want everyone to benefit from our experiences and to have the same chance of good eye health. Will the Minister support a national eye health strategy? As has previously been mentioned, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) cannot be here today, but she recently introduced the National Eye Health Strategy Bill. Will the Minister support the Bill on Second Reading on Friday 3 March? Everyone here wants the best for people in their communities. The best way forward—and I would say this—is to look at the Scottish example and put aside the barriers that prevent people from having their eyes tested regularly.

2.15 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, and to respond on behalf of the shadow Health and Social Care team. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate and for his continued advocacy on this issue. I particularly liked his description of the experience of walking with a guide dog, and how that lived experience has helped him become a campaigner. The hon. Member is a voice for issues that often do not get enough time in this place.

More than 2 million people live with sight loss in the UK, and by 2050 the number will reach 4 million. Ophthalmology is the NHS’s busiest outpatient service, with 7.5 million hospital attendees last year. With demand for eye care services set to soar by 40% over the next 20 years, it is vital that we get this right. The Government must have a plan.

We have all been sharing our personal experiences with eye services, and I am no stranger to them, having something quite unusual called keratoconus—it is

particularly bad in my right eye. I understand how worrying it can be when one discovers that they have eye pathology.

I pay tribute to the continued campaigning work of the Association of Optometrists, the Royal National Institute of Blind People and so many others for their work on eye health. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), who is a fantastic advocate on this issue. It is very welcome that NHS England has appointed the first ever national clinical director for eye care, a role that aims to put ophthalmology on a par with other major specialties and that will lead to the development of a national strategy.

As we have heard today, NHS eye services are not keeping pace with demand. Waiting lists for ophthalmology treatments have increased by more than 130% over the last 10 years. Over 650,000 patients are stuck on NHS ophthalmology waiting lists in England, with tens of thousands of patients waiting longer than a year. That is unacceptable. Those waiting lists have been longstanding; even pre-pandemic, the system was in trouble.

In 2018, the APPG on eye health and visual impairment found that the current system of eye care was failing patients on a “grand scale”. Waiting lists have increased every year since 2010. For years, there have been calls for the Government to act, but those calls have fallen on deaf ears. It is 12 years of Conservative Government failure that have caused waiting lists to grow and left ophthalmology services in the state they are in now. Patients simply deserve better.

Increased staffing pressures compound the issue. More than three quarters of units in the UK reported unfilled consultant posts, with over two thirds of hospital eye units using locum doctors to fill those vacancies. Many eye units rely, to a large extent, on non-medical clinical staff working in extended roles, or doing work traditionally performed by an ophthalmologist. I ask the Minister, what assessment has the Department made of the impact the current ophthalmologist workforce shortages are having on patient care? Will the upcoming workforce strategy include a commitment to fund the workforce that is identified as being needed to meet patient demand?

I am pleased that the debate as also focused on the devolved nations. In Northern Ireland, at the Western Health and Social Care Trust, the average wait for routine cataract surgery is more than six years. These are grandparents who cannot see their grandchildren properly; these are people who have to give up work because they cannot see. Patients are suffering. The stress and anxiety that long waits such as those have on patients cannot and should not be ignored. There is a huge personal cost. Here is yet another example of Government decisions costing people a full and healthy life.

Along with tackling the workforce challenges, enabling the effective integration of primary and secondary eye care services is key to the plan for eye health. The Labour-run Welsh Government are leading the way in ophthalmology data and referrals and in reform of the general ophthalmic services contract. Wales is ensuring that there is more detailed data on ophthalmology waiting lists. It is also developing a comprehensive, interoperable electronic patient record system, as recommended by the Royal College of Ophthalmologists. When will the Government be serious about eye health and do the same?

The next Labour Government will take eye health seriously. We will pull every available lever to get ophthalmology patients treated sooner. Sticking plasters are not enough. We need a Government that will grasp the root causes of the staffing crisis in the NHS. That is why Labour will end tax breaks for non-doms and use the money raised to expand our NHS workforce. The next Labour Government will train a new generation of doctors, nurses and midwives to treat patients on time again. We will double the number of medical school places to ensure we have the workforce that we need across different specialties, including ophthalmology.

Labour has a plan. I would be grateful if the Minister set out the Government's position and explained to patients why they continue to wait so long for treatment. They cannot afford to wait any longer.

2.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing forward this important debate. He has been a strong advocate for eye health for a long time. He speaks from huge knowledge and personal experience, and I listened to his speech with great interest. Given that health is a devolved matter, a lot of my response will focus on England, as he suggested. I understand that the devolved nations are facing similar challenges. We are always interested in sharing ideas and working with our counterparts, in answer to the question asked by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows).

There are 2 million people living with sight loss, and that is predicted to double to 4 million by 2050 as a result of an ageing society. Sight loss is often preventable, and that is why prevention and early detection, along with access to diagnosis and timely treatment, are key. One of the best ways to protect our sight is to have regular sight tests. The hon. Member for Strangford rightly underlined why that is so important with his powerful story about the tennis ball-sized tumour that his constituent had taken out.

When combined with early treatment, sight tests can prevent people from losing their sight. That is why we continue to fund free NHS sight tests for many, including those on income-related benefits, those aged 60 and over, and those at risk of glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy—two of the main causes of preventable sight loss. More than 12 million NHS sight tests were provided to eligible groups in 2021-22. We also provide help with the cost of glasses and contact lenses through NHS optical vouchers. Eligible groups include children and those on income-related benefits. The NHS invests over £500 million annually to provide sight tests and optical vouchers.

The risk factors for sight loss include ageing, medical conditions such as diabetes, and lifestyle factors such as smoking and obesity. We are taking action to reduce obesity and smoking. Smoking rates in England are already the lowest in history, and we remain committed to going further to be smoke free by 2030. We are working to drive down the number of people who take up smoking, and we are supporting those who wish to quit. We are also working with the food industry to ensure that it is easier for people to make healthy choices, and we are supporting adults and children living with obesity to achieve and maintain a healthier weight.

Turning to the medical conditions that lead to sight loss, diabetic retinopathy—a common complication of diabetes—is a potentially sight-threatening condition. The diabetic retinopathy screening programme now provides screening to over 80% of those living with diabetes annually. Between 2010 and 2019-20, the number of adults aged between 16 and 64 who are registered annually as visually impaired due to diabetic retinopathy has fallen by 20%, meaning that it is no longer the main cause of sight loss in adults of working age. The screening programme has played a major role in that.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his helpful response. The target of providing retinopathy screening to 80% of those living with diabetes has been achieved. Are there any plans to try to reach the other 20%? I am diabetic. I had my retinopathy test about four weeks ago; I get it every year. I know the encouragement and confidence that testing gives people once they know they are okay. Are there any ideas for how we can get to the other 20%?

Neil O'Brien: Absolutely. As the hon. Gentleman says, we are keen to constantly drive that rate up, and we can talk more offline about the different things that we can potentially do to drive it up even further. The healthy child programme recommends eye examinations at birth, six weeks and age two, and school vision screening is also recommended for reception-age children.

The hon. Member for Strangford raised a question about a special school, which I will address specifically. The NHS long-term plan made a commitment to ensure that children and young people with a learning disability, autism or both who are in special residential schools have access to sight tests. NHS England's proof of concept programme has been testing an NHS sight-testing model in both day and residential schools, and it is currently evaluating its proof of concept as part of programme development, which we expect to conclude towards the start of 2023. The evaluation will then inform decisions about the scope, funding and delivery of any future sight-testing model. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that, at present, absolutely no decisions have been made; we are waiting for the evidence that that programme is generating.

I turn to secondary care. Once an issue with eye health is detected, it is vital that individuals have access to timely diagnosis and any necessary treatment. The NHS continued to prioritise those with urgent eye care needs throughout covid-19. However, we acknowledge the impact that the pandemic has had on our ophthalmology services, as it has had on other care pathways. Our fantastic NHS eye care teams are working hard to increase capacity and provide care as quickly as possible. We have set ambitious targets to recover services through the elective recovery plan, supported by more than £8 billion over the next two years, in addition to the £2 billion elective recovery fund and the £700 million targeted investment fund announced last year.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Neil O'Brien: I give way with pleasure to the hon. Lady, who has been hot-footing it from a funeral to attend the debate. I will seamlessly fill in, so she can catch her breath. I congratulate her on making it here.

Marsha De Cordova: I honestly thank the Minister for giving way. I have just got here from the funeral of a dear friend, Roger Lewis, who, as a totally blind man, was also a strong advocate for a national plan for eye care in England and the devolved nations. I congratulate my dear and honourable friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), on securing this very important debate.

As many Members will know, I currently have a Bill calling for a national strategy for eye health in England. We need to ensure that eye care provision is joined up across England to reduce avoidable sight loss but also, more importantly, to end the fragmentation of services. Is the Minister willing to meet me to discuss some of the provisions in the Bill, to ensure that we can create an eye care pathway that ensures that nobody who is losing their sight—or has already lost it—will go through the pathway without the right support and timely treatment?

Neil O'Brien: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention, and I will be happy to meet her. It sounds like there is an important connection between where she has just been and this debate. I am extremely happy to meet her to talk about that.

I will continue setting out our strategy. I have already talked about screening in primary care, and I was setting out the sums of money that we are investing—the £8 billion plus the £2 billion—in elective recovery following the pandemic. NHS England has been supporting NHS trusts to increase capacity in surgical hubs, and the independent sector has also been used to increase the delivery of cataract surgery, in particular. In 2021-22, nearly half a million cataract procedures were provided on the NHS, which is actually more than before the pandemic, so that is recovering.

Beyond recovering from the pandemic and looking to the future, hospital eye care services are facing increasing demand. As a number of hon. Members have pointed out, ophthalmology is already the busiest out-patient speciality, and the predictions are that the demand for services will increase by 30% to 40% over the next 20 years as the result of an ageing society.

To help address these challenges, NHS England's transformation programme is looking at how technology could allow more patients to be managed in the community and supported virtually through image sharing with specialists in NHS trusts. Current pilots for cataracts and glaucoma are allowing primary care practices to care for these patients and refer only those who need to be seen by specialists. The learning from these pilots will feed into any possible future service model. That could allow us to use the primary care workforce to alleviate some of the secondary care pressures.

I am delighted that the NHSE has appointed the first national clinical director for eye care, Louisa Wickham, who will oversee this work programme. I am aware that the APPG on eye health and visual impairment has called for there to be one Minister responsible for primary and secondary care services. I can confirm that my portfolio covers both those areas, so I will be taking an active interest in the development of that transformation programme and strategy.

A number of hon. Members have raised questions about the workforce, and we acknowledge that there are challenges across the system, including in ophthalmology.

NHS England is developing a long-term workforce plan that will consider the number of staff and roles required and will set out the actions and reforms needed to improve workforce supply and retention. We have already invested in growing the ophthalmology workforce with more training places in 2022, but there is more to do. We are also improving training for existing staff so that they can work at the top of their licence.

Research is an area that the hon. Member for Strangford is interested in, and I was extremely sorry to hear from the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) about her keratoconus. That is one area where, fortunately, research and new treatments are coming online, so research is hugely important. While we have effective treatments, particularly for macular disease, we absolutely cannot rest on our laurels because medicine continues to evolve. We recognise that research and innovation are crucial to driving improvements in clinical care and improved outcomes for people living with sight-threatening conditions. The £5 billion investment in health-related research and development announced in the 2021 spending review reflects the Government's commitment to supporting research into the most pressing challenges of our time, including sight loss.

Over the past five financial years, the National Institute for Health and Care Research has invested more than £100 million in funding and support for eye conditions research, and many of the studies focus specifically on sight loss. The NIHR Moorfields Biomedical Research Centre has recently been awarded £20 million from the NIHR for another five years of vision research, allowing it to continue its mission of preserving sight and driving equity through innovation. Through the NIHR, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland work together on a range of research topics, and the devolved Administrations co-fund several research programmes.

To assess how well interventions are achieving their intended aims, it is important that we track their impact, which hon. Members have mentioned. The public health outcomes framework's preventable sight loss indicator tracks the rate of sight loss per 100,000 population for three of the most common causes of preventable sight loss: age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy.

We are making progress. The indicator shows the impact that the new treatments have had on the rate of sight loss due to age-related macular degeneration. Despite an ageing population, the rate of sight loss in 2019-20 was 105.4 cases per 100,000, down from 114 per 100,000 in 2015-16, so there has been an improvement on macular degeneration. The open availability of this data provides a valuable resource for integrated care boards to draw on in identifying what is needed in their areas and for local democratic accountability for any variation in performance against public health outcomes.

Jim Shannon: The answers are very helpful. One thing that all three Members referred to was the waiting list, and those who lose their eyesight just because they have been on a waiting list for diagnosis, examination and investigation. I know the pandemic created lots of problems in relation to the waiting list. Does the Department intend to have a strategy that will reduce the number of people on waiting lists to ensure that those waiting for a diagnosis retain their eyesight?

Neil O'Brien: I mentioned earlier that one of the main goals of the huge £8 billion plus £2 billion investment is in elective recovery because, as the hon. Gentleman said, the pandemic has had a huge impact. We have already cleared the number of people waiting for two years. The next milestone is to clear those waiting 18 months and then to work through the plan and bring down the numbers using that additional money over time, reducing those waiting the longest first and then steadily reducing the number of people waiting in total.

I acknowledge the importance of good vision throughout life, and especially as we get older. I hope that what I have outlined today provides some reassurance that we acknowledge the ongoing challenges faced by eye care services and are taking action to address them.

2.35 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Members who spoke in the debate. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) brought a breadth of knowledge to it, and we thank her for that. As I said earlier, I always like to hear what the other devolved nations are doing, and she outlined very well what Scotland is doing. With the See Hear provision, Scotland is expanding its eyesight services, with regular checks and free examinations every two years. She referred to her personal circumstances—it is always good to bring a personal story—of having had cataracts in both eyes. She does not miss too much, so I think we can be pretty sure that her eyesight has greatly improved. She also referred to improving people's quality of life with eyesight care, and she referred to smoking, drinking and diet and the need to address those three things.

Every one of the things that the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw referred to was also referred to by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan). She referred to the need for a plan, and to people waiting for six years at the Western Health and Social Care Trust in Northern Ireland. My goodness—that is unbelievable. My mum waited three years for a cataracts operation. She was not desperate for it, so she did not mind waiting for three years, but in the last six months it was coming to the stage where she was unable to drive, which was a problem.

The hon. Member for Tooting said that patients deserve better, and she referred to the staff shortages—I think the Minister heard about that very clearly—and the integration of services. She gave Wales as an example. We hear much about Wales in a negative fashion; today, she introduced a positive. It is evidentially-based as well, which means that it is absolutely on the button. Again, we thank her for that. She also referred to the new IT system in Wales, and the fact that patients cannot wait any longer.

I gave an apology for the circumstances of my friend, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), which we understand, and I spoke to you personally beforehand, Mr Sharma, so you know the reason for it. We really missed her contribution to the debate because she brings a wealth and a breadth of knowledge. I commend her for being the chair of the APPG on eye health and visual impairment. She was able to make an intervention that was as good as a speech, so well done to her.

I thank the Minister, as always. He comes with a positive attitude, which we are all very pleased to see. He is committed to sharing ideas with the regions. I want to see that. The hon. Members for Motherwell and Wishaw, for Tooting and for Battersea want to see that as well. The Minister referred to the 12 million eye tests in 2021-22. That is an achievement. We cannot deny the positive things that he referred to. He also referred to ageing, diabetes, childcare and the healthy child programme, learning disabilities and, in answer to my question, the steps that have been taken to address eye tests for children who are disabled and educationally challenged. I think that is good. Those are some of the things that the hon. Member for Battersea and all of us present are very keen to see.

The Minister was also very positive in relation to primary and secondary care combined under his ministership. He confirmed that one of things that we asked for has happened, which is good news. He also referred to the workforce, which we have some concerns about; I think the shadow Minister referred to them, and I know that I did. It is important that we have strategy to fill those vacancies.

Lastly, research has moved on fantastically. I went to an event in Portcullis House yesterday on some of the medical research that has been done. The advances in medicine are incredible. We can never fail to be moved or encouraged by what we see. The investment and research that the Minister referred to is good. On the waiting lists issue for reversible sight loss and elective recovery, the moneys are there to make that happen.

In introducing the debate, I referred to the lovely terminology that we use for all the different groups that come together: The Eyes Have It. Well, today, the eyes have it. The Minister has given us a very positive response, and we thank him for it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered a blueprint for eye health in England and the devolved nations.

2.40 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 15 December 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

"Help to Grow: Digital": Scheme Closure

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Grant Shapps): This statement concerns the Government's decision to close the Help to Grow: Digital programme. Help to Grow: Digital will close to new business applications for discounts on 2 February 2023. Discounts issued for eligible software must be redeemed within 30 days from issue date.

The scheme has supported businesses to grow, but with take-up lower than expected, the Government cannot justify the continued cost of the schemes to the taxpayer. The decision has been taken to refocus efforts towards other support mechanisms for small businesses, ensuring businesses get the backing they need in the most efficient and productive way possible. The Help to Grow: Management scheme remains in place.

The Government continue to support small businesses, such as through the Government-backed British Business Bank's start-up loans, which are available to help aspiring entrepreneurs start and grow their businesses. The Government have taken action to protect all eligible UK businesses, including small businesses, from rising energy costs through the energy bill relief scheme.

[HCWS450]

CABINET OFFICE

Government Transparency and Accountability

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): My noble Friend the Minister of State (Baroness Neville-Rolfe) has today made the following written statement:

Since 2010, the Government have been at the forefront of opening up data to allow Parliament, the public and the media to hold public bodies to account. Such online transparency is crucial to delivering value for money, cutting waste and inefficiency, and ensuring every pound of taxpayers' money is spent in the best possible way.

The Government will continue to look at how the range of information published by the Government can be improved and made as useful as possible to the public, press and Parliament. The following subject areas include documents and information that the Government are due to publish.

Routine transparency data on Ministers, special advisers and senior officials

Departments will today be publishing routine transparency data on Ministers', special advisers' and senior officials' gifts, hospitality, travel and external meetings, for the period of July to September 2022. This data covers the returns for the Prime Minister, Government Chief Whip and Leaders of the House of Commons and the Lords, as well as the Cabinet Office.

Departments will also be publishing the business appointment rules advice summary for the same period.

List of ministerial responsibilities

The Government will today be publishing the list of ministerial responsibilities on gov.uk. Copies will also be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The list includes details of ministerial Departments, the Ministers within each Department, their portfolio responsibilities and private offices and the executive agencies within each Department.

Salaries of Members of His Majesty's Government

The Government will today be updating the salaries of Members of His Majesty's Government with information for the financial year 2022-2023 on gov.uk. This indicates the salaries to which Ministers are entitled and the actual salaries that they claim, along with supplementary information on ministerial salaries, allowances and payments on leaving office.

Cabinet Office annual report and accounts 2021-22

This annual report and accounts will also be laid before Parliament today. The publication includes the Cabinet Office's audited financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2022 and a review of performance and governance arrangements. The annual report will be published on gov.uk.

Cabinet Office accounting officer system statement 2022

This publication is a single statement setting out all of the accountability relationships and processes within the Department. This update takes into account change since the previous version was published in 2020. I have requested that a copy of the accounting officer system statement be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The publication will also be published on gov.uk.

Cabinet Office: Spend control data for July to September 2022

Along with all Government Departments, in 2010 the Cabinet Office committed to publish quarterly data on its planned spending that has been subject to the Cabinet Office spend controls. The spend controls covered are digital and technology, commercial, property, advertising, marketing and communications, and contingent labour (as for equivalent figures published by other Departments). For the quarter covered, 12 separate items of the Cabinet Office's own spending (with a total value of £734 million) were approved under the cross-Government Cabinet Office spending control.

Monthly workforce management information (September and October 2022)

As standard, the Government are today publishing our monthly breakdown of workforce headcount and pay costs. This is a routine publication and will be published on gov.uk.

Public procurement review service—progress report 2021-22

The Government will today publish their annual progress report, detailing trends in issues raised to the public procurement review service. In this publication, we look to consider such trends and make recommendations on how to improve the service moving forwards. The report will be published, as usual, on gov.uk.

[HCWS449]

TREASURY

Life Insurance Taxation

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): The Government are announcing the following measure—of which there are two components—which will take immediate effect from today.

The first part of the measure applies to re-insurers of a specific type of long-term insurance business known as basic life assurance and general annuity business (BLAGAB). It addresses a possible tax mismatch in the life insurance rules where re-insurance precedes a transfer of BLAGAB. In this situation the measure eliminates the possibility of a mismatch by classifying the re-insured

business as BLAGAB in the hands of the re-insurer. This will protect Exchequer revenues needed to fund vital public services.

The second part of the measure addresses an industry concern that the current scope of section 92 of the Finance Act 2012 may be unnecessarily wide and is blocking commercial transactions. It amends that section so that it does not apply where substantially all the insurance risks of a book of BLAGAB are assumed by a re-insurer.

The draft legislation will be published today on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/re-insurance-in-the-course-of-transfers-of-long-term-business>. It will be accompanied by a tax information and impact note and an explanatory note. A copy of the legislation will also be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS453]

Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Act 2022: Treasury Directions

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government are committed to public service pensions which are fair to public sector workers. In 2015 (2014 for local government workers in England and Wales), reforms were made to public service pension schemes in England and Wales to provide workers with fairer pensions arrangements and to make the pension schemes more sustainable and affordable for the longer term. These reforms followed the recommendations of the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission. The Government believe the 2015 changes to public service pensions balanced the interests of public service workers, employers and taxpayers fairly.

However, when the reforms were introduced, they provided “transitional protections” which allowed members who were close to retirement to remain in the previous scheme (the legacy scheme). In December 2018, the Court of Appeal found that these transitional protections in the judicial and firefighters’ pension schemes gave rise to unlawful discrimination (the McCloud and Sargeant case).

The Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Act 2022 was enacted to remedy the discrimination identified by the courts. The Act provides a retrospective remedy, such that affected members are treated as if they had always been in the legacy scheme for their period of remediable service, as well as providing affected members a choice of which pension benefits they wish to receive for that period when those benefits are put into payment. The detail of the retrospective remedy for affected members will be set out in scheme regulations made under the Act for each affected pension scheme. The retrospective remedy is due to come into force by 1 October 2023.

The Act provides for HM Treasury to make directions to set out how schemes must exercise the powers provided in the Act in making scheme regulations. The Government have made and published Treasury directions today and they are available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-service-pensions-and-judicial-offices-act-2022-treasury-directions>.

The directions ensure that scheme regulations for the public service schemes can implement a comprehensive remedy for affected members. The directions provide

for consistent treatment across the public service pension schemes to enable schemes to return members to the position they would have been in had the discrimination not arisen. The publication of the Treasury directions today enables the responsible authorities—the Secretaries of State with responsibility for the public service schemes and the Welsh and Scottish Ministers for the devolved schemes—to proceed to develop and consult their stakeholders on scheme regulations to deliver the remedy in each of the public service schemes. Following consultation, the Secretaries of State responsible for the pension schemes for the NHS, teachers, local government workers and police in England and Wales, firefighters in England, the UK armed forces and the civil service in Great Britain, will then make and lay secondary legislation in Parliament. Scheme regulations must come into force by 1 October 2023.

[HCWS452]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Ian Paterson: Patient Safety and Government Implementation Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): On 16 December 2021, the Government published their response to the findings of the inquiry into the issues raised by disgraced surgeon, Ian Paterson. We reiterated the apologies of the Government to the patients affected and those close to them and committed to ensuring we did more to protect patients in the future.

In line with this commitment, the Government accepted the overwhelming majority of the recommendations made by the inquiry and set out an implementation plan of 40 actions to put those recommendations into effect. Finally, we committed to providing a further update on the progress of this implementation plan in 12-months’ time. I am happy to be able to publish this report fulfilling that commitment today.

All the relevant bodies within the health sector have been united in understanding that these changes are essential. We all agree that patients cannot be failed in the same way again. On behalf of the Government, I want to thank every organisation that has engaged in this process for their commitment to making improvements. I would especially like to thank the representatives of patient groups impacted by Ian Paterson, who have campaigned tirelessly to ensure their experiences do not go unheeded. They have continued to be a source of inspiration and expertise throughout the implementation period.

I am pleased to report that good progress has been made across the implementation plan which we set out in December 2021. The report published today provides full details of this progress against the four themes of the Government’s response as laid out in the implementation plan. In this statement, I will highlight some of the most important developments under each of these themes.

Patient-centred information

Patients now have more access to information relevant to their treatment than they did during Ian Paterson’s time practising. This includes access to information

about the performance of consultants working for independent sector healthcare providers, and specialties in the NHS. These continue to be added to, so patients will have more, and better, access to independent information before choosing a consultant. NHS England (NHSE) will work with the professions so that meaningful consultant-level information on the numbers and types of procedures performed should be made publicly available. If patients choose to be treated in the independent sector, there is now more information about what to expect, with further information to be made available over the coming year.

Patients now have the right to access their treatment records and clinicians are aware of the need to write to patients directly following a consultation or treatment, rather than only writing to their GP. This information gives patients a record of their condition, and test results to reflect on, or to seek a second opinion if required. This is reinforced by ensuring patients gets the time they need to consider treatment options and have access to a range of new resources to help them consider their options; options that patients will also be able to discuss with medical professionals who are equipped to handle these conversations.

Making challenge heard

Doctors across more specialties now have independent data on their practice available and will be required to use this as part of their appraisal and revalidation processes. This will help to identify issues and fix them. Staff in the health system also have more opportunities to make their voices heard about a patient's care, including through clarified guidance and assessment of multidisciplinary team use as a forum.

Care Quality Commission (CQC) updated its guidance on complaints processes in early 2022. It is now easier for patients to raise concerns about treatment they receive and access independent resolution of their complaint if they are unsatisfied with the provider's handling. As part of the implementation of the NHS patient safety strategy, NHSE has introduced measures to advance safety and the response to harm. The Government have appointed the first ever patient safety commissioner for England, Dr Henrietta Hughes OBE.

Ensuring accountability

CQC published the new single assessment framework in July 2022, which sets out what good care looks like, and National Quality Board published national guidance on system quality groups, setting out the requirements for quality governance in integrated care systems.

Alongside this, we have seen significant culture change in the independent sector, now leaving no doubt that independent providers must take responsibility for maintaining high standards of care in their facilities, irrespective of how the medical professionals involved are engaged by them (through employment or practising privileges). This has been supported by Independent Healthcare Providers Network's refresh of the medical practitioners assurance framework in September 2022. NHS Resolution launched new exclusion guidance in April 2022.

Putting things right

Patients who are impacted by potential issues with their care will be reviewed through recall processes which are now better informed of how to put patients at

the centre of their focus. The new national recall framework was published in June 2022 to facilitate this.

Patients will continue to receive apologies from healthcare professionals and providers for potential issues with their care when appropriate. Enhanced training and resources are now available to clinicians to ensure these apologies are delivered effectively and meaningfully.

The Government are working to ensure that any future changes to indemnity and insurance arrangements will be made using the best evidence base available. This includes a thorough assessment of the impact on patients, healthcare professionals, providers, and the wider market; with the aim of improving the position for patients when receiving treatment from any regulated healthcare professional, regardless of the setting. The Government's ambition is that when this work concludes, patients have confidence that they can access appropriate compensation if harmed while receiving care, including when harm arises from criminal/intentional acts or omissions. The summary of responses to the consultation on appropriate clinical negligence cover for regulated healthcare professionals will be published alongside this implementation update on 15 December 2022.

The Government will be continuing to ensure this work is built upon, as part of our wider commitment to ensuring patient safety and high standards of care across the health system. We understand that there is no room for complacency when it comes to patient safety and, together with the patient safety commissioner, will make sure this is one building block towards a health system in which patients and those close to them can have the maximum possible confidence.

Copies of the Government's full implementation update will be available at: <https://www.gov.uk>.

[HCWS455]

JUSTICE

Rape Review Action Plan

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): The Government are today publishing a progress report 18 months on from the publication of the end-to-end rape review action plan. This is the third six-monthly progress report on implementation of the rape review action plan and demonstrates the Government's ongoing commitment to be transparent and accountable to the public on our progress in delivering the ambitions of the rape review.

The latest progress report sets out that we are on track to meet our ambitions in the review to more than double the number of adult rape cases reaching court by the end of this Parliament. In Q2 2022, compared with the 2019 quarterly average, adult rape police referrals to the Crown Prosecution Service were up 95%, CPS adult rape charges were up 65% and the number of adult rape cases reaching Crown Court were up 91%.

The Government have also today published an independently authored report on the policing aspects of Operation Soteria, a policing and CPS programme to develop new operating models for the investigation and prosecution of rape in England and Wales by June 2023. The report outlines the key findings from research in five police forces and provides an initial draft of the

national operating model for the investigation of rape which will be available to all police forces from June 2023.

The rape review progress report sets out that:

We are also publishing today a series of user-friendly guides on gov.uk for victims of rape and sexual assault, to enable victims to better understand what they can expect as their case progresses through the criminal justice system.

We have launched the 24/7 rape and sexual abuse support line which will provide all victims and survivors access to dedicated support whenever and wherever they need it.

We have also completed the expansion of Operation Soteria to a further 14 police forces and three further CPS areas. The aims of this ambitious joint police and CPS programme of work include:

Improve relationships between police and CPS and prioritise early collaboration so strong cases can be built as early as possible;

Improve victim communication including a pledge for more frequent contact and a clear guide to explain the justice process;

Strengthen the partnership between independent sexual violence advisers, CPS and police to better co-ordinate support for victims.

We successfully rolled out pre-recorded cross-examination for victims of sexual offences, a vital measure now available in all Crown Courts across England and Wales. This will spare survivors and victims the trauma of giving evidence in the glare of a courtroom.

We introduced new powers through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act to stop unnecessary and intrusive requests for victims' phones and we are continuing to work with police forces to ensure they have the capability to return victims devices within 24 hours.

These actions form part of the Government's ambition to create meaningful cross-system change, improve the experience of victims and bring more perpetrators to justice.

[HCWS448]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Personal Independence Payment

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove): Today the Department will publish the latest update on progress on making backdated payments to personal independence payment claimants who are affected by the MH and RJ decisions of the Upper Tribunal (UT). The release will be published at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/pip-administrative-exercise-progress-on-cases-cleared>.

The MH decision changed how overwhelming psychological distress is considered when assessing someone's ability to plan and follow a journey. The RJ decision changed how we decide whether someone can carry out an activity safely and if they need supervision.

As at the end of November 2022, we have reviewed around 990,000 cases against the MH decision. This includes cases where claimants have previously been assessed as having "overwhelming psychological distress" or who have a "psychiatric disorder" as one of their health conditions. We have also reviewed around 1,100,000 cases against the RJ decision. This includes cases where claimants have a "neurological disease" as one of their health conditions. All reviews will have been carried out by a case manager within the Department.

Around 8,400 arrears payments, totalling around £44 million, have been made. No one should have seen their PIP reduced because of this exercise.

In addition, we will continue to review any case for any claimant who asks us to.

This has been a complex and substantial exercise, involving over 2,090,000 reviews against two UT decisions. Our approach demonstrates that we have prioritised claimants who are most likely to benefit, to make backdated payments as quickly as possible.

We have set out further background to this release in an updated "Frequently Asked Questions". I will deposit a copy of this document and the statistical release in the Library of the House.

[HCWS451]

UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Follow-up Report

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove): Today, I will place in the Library of the House a copy of the UK's 2022 follow-up report to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, following the 2016 inquiry.

This Government are committed to eliminating barriers faced by disabled people, in order to realise their full participation and inclusion in society. The follow-up report demonstrates how we are implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and showcases positive action taking place across the UK to support disabled people.

The UK Government have implemented numerous policies and programmes to tackle the barriers faced by disabled people relevant to the articles examined by the inquiry, as highlighted in our latest report to the UN Committee for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

We have seen 1.3 million more disabled people in work than in 2017—delivering a Government commitment five years early. We are investing £1.3 billion over three years in employment support for disabled people and people with health conditions.

The Government are providing households with cost of living support totalling over £37 billion this year. This includes a £650 cost of living payment for people on means-tested benefits. In addition to this, six million eligible disabled people have received a one-off, disability cost of living payment of £150 to help with additional costs.

We are reforming social care support to improve disabled people's access to care services and ensure integrated health and care support. Increased funding for adult social care will also ensure a fairer cost of care for both carers and patients. Improvements in the accessibility of homes and transport are helping disabled people to live independently and have a better standard of living.

We supported the passage of the British Sign Language (BSL) Act (2022) which recognises BSL as a language of England, Wales and Scotland in its own right. A BSL advisory board is being established to guide implementation of the Act from the perspective of people who use BSL.

Recognising the need for wider societal change across all industries, our 19 disability and access ambassadors are using their expertise and influence in business to help drive and support changes in access for disabled consumers and employees.

Alongside this, we recognise the importance of co-ordinated action across Government, reflecting the full range of services and opportunities that deliver full participation. Our ministerial disability champions have been supporting and driving forward work on disability in their respective departments.

We continue to engage with disabled people and stakeholders through disabled people's organisations, networks

and relevant organisations. This is to ensure that lived experience underpins regular and co-ordinated action across Government. We remain committed to improving the lives of disabled people and making our society a more inclusive and accessible place for all disabled people.

[HCWS454]

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