

Monday
19 December 2022

Volume 725
No. 94



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 19 December 2022

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

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

FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 725

TWELFTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2022-2023

House of Commons

Monday 19 December 2022

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That the Address of 28th November, praying that His Majesty will reappoint Mr William Lifford to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority with effect from 11 January 2023 for the period ending 10 January 2026, was presented to His Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

NEW MEMBER

The following Member made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Andrew Western, for Stretford and Urmston.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Police: Efficiency and Resourcing

1. **Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve (a) efficiency and (b) resourcing of the police force. [902842]

13. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve (a) efficiency and (b) resourcing of the police force. [902857]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): Our police force is one of the best in the world and, as we approach Christmas and the new year, I wish to take this opportunity to thank all of them for their heroic efforts this year.

I want to empower our policemen and women, stripping out unnecessary bureaucracy and boosting their numbers. That is why I asked Sir Stephen House to report back to me on productivity, with a focus on mental health. That is why I am also pleased that Cumbria police now has more than 1,000 police officers and will have the highest number in its history once its recruitment drive is complete next year.

Simon Fell: I thank the Home Secretary for her response and for the good news about Cumbria police as well—that is always welcome.

Around 40% of the crimes committed today are fraud, but only about 1% of the police's resources are dedicated to tackling that as an issue. Policing leaders have repeatedly told the Home Affairs Committee that a new policing model is needed to address this growing threat. Organisations such as the Royal United Services Institute have pointed the way to sensible and achievable plans for how we might be able to grow the skills, capacity and capability in policing that is needed to turn the tide not just on an epidemic of fraud, but on what is now a national security concern. Can my right hon. and learned Friend please outline what steps are being taken in the Home Office to review that capability and resourcing, and when we can expect to see the fraud plan published?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend speaks very powerfully about the prevalence of fraud and online crime when it comes to modern-day crime fighting. Tackling it requires a unified and co-ordinated response from Government, from law enforcement and from industry. We will publish the fraud strategy very shortly setting out the response. It will focus on prevention and on bolstering the law

enforcement response. None the less, some good work is already going on. I applaud the Metropolitan police on the largest anti-fraud operation relating to the iSpooof website, which was responsible for more than 3 million fraudulent calls in 2022, and there have been 100 arrests so far. There have also been some other high-profile successes relating to fraud, but there is much more that we can do.

Rob Butler: I warmly welcome the investment that means Thames Valley Police has already taken on more than 600 new officers. However, because most of them have to enter on a graduate programme, they are currently required to spend 20% of their time on training courses away from the police station, meaning they are not available to answer 999 calls or patrol neighbourhoods. I am delighted that, thanks to my right hon. and learned Friend's intervention, it will after all no longer become compulsory for new police officers to have degrees. Can she explain what progress she is making to achieve that change and how it will benefit policing in Aylesbury and beyond?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is right to highlight this issue. I want policing to be open to the best, the brightest and the bravest, and that does not always mean that new entrants need to have a degree. I have listened to concerns from police leaders and various people in the sector that we risk getting too academic when it comes to policing. That is why I instructed the College of Policing to design options for a new non-degree entry route, increasing choices for chief constables when it comes to recruitment and ensuring that we build a police force fit for the future. That is what common-sense policing is all about.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Across Barnsley local people are concerned about antisocial behaviour, from fly-tipping to arson. With police forces having seen cuts in the past 12 years, what are the Government doing to support them so that they have the personnel and resources to tackle antisocial behaviour in local communities?

Suella Braverman: Antisocial behaviour is a real focus for neighbourhood policing. Ultimately it depends on local police forces having increased numbers of policemen and women on the frontline, responding quickly to neighbourhood crime, antisocial behaviour, burglary, vandalism and graffiti. That is why I am glad that across the country we are seeing increased numbers of officers recruited to our ranks.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The police in my constituency work tirelessly to keep local residents safe, but every year they are asked to do more with less. We have lost Richmond police station, we have had budgets stretched further every year and our local officers are increasingly being pulled out of the community at short notice to support events in central London. Does the Home Secretary agree that a visible, regular local presence would help the Met Police to build trust with Londoners, and will she support the Liberal Democrats' call for a return to community policing and put an end to police station closures?

Suella Braverman: The hon. Lady should take up some of her concerns about London's policing with the Mayor of London, who I am afraid has a very disappointing track record when it comes to rising crime in London, particularly knife crime. I urge the Lib Dems to stop their meaningless opposition and get behind the Government's plan to recruit police numbers and ensure they have the right powers.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): The Home Secretary likes to talk about back to basics policing, but last week's police grants saw core Government funding for the police fall by £62 million, with more of the budget funded through council tax, shifting the extra burden onto struggling households during the cost of living crisis. In the meantime, funding for core priorities such as fraud and serious violence has been cut by £5 million and £4.5 million respectively. Can the Home Secretary explain these cuts, or is this just a case of her Government's abject failure to grow the economy, back our police and keep our streets safe?

Suella Braverman: I am sorry, but the hon. Lady needs to get her facts right. This Government are proposing a total police funding settlement of up to £17.2 billion in 2023-24, an increase of up to £287 million compared with 2022-23. Assuming that there is full take-up of the precept flexibility, something this Government introduced, overall police funding available to PCCs will increase by up to £523 million next year—a welcome increase and one that I hope she would support.

Fire Cover: Nottinghamshire

2. **Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con):** Whether she has made an assessment of the adequacy of fire cover in Nottinghamshire. [902843]

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): The level of fire cover in Nottinghamshire is a matter for the Nottinghamshire and City of Nottingham Fire Authority, but I would observe that in Nottinghamshire the Labour-controlled fire and rescue service has cut firefighter numbers by 11% since 2016, despite its funding settlement having been about the same as other fire and rescue services, which, nationally have seen only a 1.6% reduction.

Ruth Edwards: The Nottinghamshire and City of Nottingham Fire Authority is proposing to cut the night shift at West Bridgford fire station despite the fact that it will save no money, the station has higher night-time call-out rates than other stations in the county, and it will leave Rushcliffe as the only borough in Nottinghamshire without full-time fire cover at night. Can the Minister advise me on the options Members of Parliament have to challenge the decision-making of local fire authorities when it is clear that they are letting down our constituents and the brave firefighters who serve them?

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for her campaigning on the issue of Nottinghamshire fire services, which she has raised with me a number of times. There is certainly no financial excuse for what the fire and rescue authority is doing. This year, it received

a 5.2% funding increase and, thanks to my hon. Friend's campaigning, when the figures are published tomorrow, there will be further good financial news for the Nottinghamshire and City of Nottingham Fire Authority. On how the fire authority's decisions might be queried, any concerns she has can be raised with the inspectorate and taken into account when the fire service is next inspected. Otherwise, the fire and rescue authority is made up of local authority representatives, who are accountable, periodically, via the ballot box.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service is well led and staffed by excellent firefighters and non-firefighting staff alike. They keep our community staff in increasingly difficult circumstances. They would like to meet the Minister to discuss their challenges, particularly in relation to funding. Will the Minister take that meeting with them and with local MPs?

Chris Philp: Yes, I would be very happy to meet the hon. Member and his colleagues from Nottinghamshire, perhaps early in the new year, to discuss this issue. As I said, Nottinghamshire fire services got a 5.2% funding increase in this current year, and I think good news can be expected when the full settlement is published tomorrow. I would observe that, in common with the rest of the country, the number of fires in Nottinghamshire has substantially decreased by 45% over the last 12 years.

Burglary

3. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps she is taking to reduce the incidence of burglary. [902844]

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): The Government are committed to tackling burglary. Domestic burglary, as measured by the crime survey, has fallen by 53% since 2010—a statistic that Opposition Members seem remarkably reluctant to discuss. We are hiring many extra police officers—the Metropolitan police force, which covers my hon. Friend's constituency, has a record number of officers—and thanks to the Home Secretary's intervention, police across the country are working to ensure that every single residential burglary receives an in-person visit from police officers.

Elliot Colburn: I congratulate the Home Secretary for stepping in where the Mayor of London has failed by pushing for police officers to attend all burglaries, and I congratulate the Metropolitan police for listening to that call and implementing Operation Tenacity, as this was a concern that I heard from many Carshalton and Wallington residents. Can my right hon. Friend, at this early stage, give me an indication of how successful the operation has been for burglary arrest numbers?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is quite right to say that the Home Secretary has acted, ensuring that there are record numbers of police in London, whereas the Mayor of London very often simply plays politics. In relation to Operation Tenacity, and the police commitment to attend every residential burglary, I am pleased to report that the Op Tenacity activity has been extremely successful. In fact, it saw 1,700 arrests in just six weeks.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): We now live, under this Government, in one of the most unequal countries in the world. Christmas is particularly hard for many people. Although I wish everyone in the House a happy Christmas, can we make sure that the police have the resources, back-up and backroom staff, without whom they cannot catch burglars? We need to stop burglary and reduce poverty in this country simultaneously.

Chris Philp: As I said, I am pleased to remind the House that since 2010, according to the crime survey of England and Wales, domestic burglary has fallen by an astonishing 53%. I agree with the hon. Gentleman about making sure that the police have adequate resources. That is why, as the Home Secretary said a few minutes ago, police and crime commissioners will receive next year up to £523 million in additional funding. By March next year, we will have an extra 20,000 police officers. Never in this country's history have we had so many police officers, which is something that, I hope, people across the House can welcome.

Asylum Backlog

4. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress her Department has made on reducing the backlog of asylum applications. [902845]

10. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on reducing the backlog of asylum applications. [902854]

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): Last week we set out plans to clear the initial decision backlog of asylum legacy cases by the end of next year. Over the summer and autumn, the Home Office reduced the number of older asylum cases by 11,000, and the number of asylum caseworkers has doubled.

Kate Osamor: Last week the International Development Committee heard from organisations working closely with refugees in the UK. I was disappointed but not surprised to hear Enver Solomon, the chief executive of the Refugee Council, say that it was not consulted about the proposals, announced last week, to tackle the backlog. Why have the Government neglected to widely consult experts, and would the Minister be willing to consider their recommendations if I was to write to him?

Robert Jenrick: I would be interested in the views of any of our stakeholders, but the Prime Minister set out a very compelling case last week to radically re-engineer the end-to-end process, with fewer interviews, shorter guidance, less paperwork, specialist caseworkers by nationality, including tackling Albanian cases, and reforming modern slavery by reducing the cooling-off period from 45 to 30 days—all steps to clear the backlog as quickly as possible.

Vicky Foxcroft: One of my constituents arrived in the UK from Afghanistan and claimed asylum in September 2021. Despite my caseworkers making regular inquiries since August 2022, we have received no updates regarding the status of his application. He tells us that the situation has made him seriously depressed. Does the Minister

agree that excessive wait times can have a hugely detrimental impact on mental health, and will he agree to look at this case in further detail?

Robert Jenrick: I would be happy to look at that case and any others that are brought to my attention. The backlog, however, is a symptom of the problem, which is that far too many people are crossing the channel illegally, and that is what this Government are determined to tackle. The hon. Lady and her Opposition colleagues have voted against every tough measure that we have sought to take in recent years. I hope that she will now get behind the measure that we are taking, the statement the Prime Minister made last week and, of course, our world-leading Rwanda partnership, which the Court today gave its agreement to.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Government introduce urgent legislation to strengthen control of our borders, and could that include a notwithstanding clause to guide the courts against using other laws that undermine the fundamental principle of the Prime Minister's policy?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out last week our intention to bring forward legislation early next year, and at the heart of that legislation will be a simple point of principle that we on this side of the House believe: no one should gain a right to live in this country if they entered illegally. From that, all things will need to flow. Nothing is off the table. We will take our obligations to deliver on that policy very seriously. That is in stark contrast to the Labour party. At the weekend, the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), could not even say whether illegal entry to this country should be an offence. That says it all. We believe in securing our borders and in controlled migration. The Labour party is the party of mass migration.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): We in Wiltshire are proud of the fact that some 900 Ukrainians will be enjoying Christmas dinners with us, and that we have entertained a large number of Afghan people who looked after us so well during the war. However, we were very surprised when last Friday 82 young Albanian men were moved into the very rural, very distantly located Wiltshire golf club without any notice at all being given to the neighbouring retirement village. Does the Minister agree that this is an inappropriate location for people of this kind, who are very probably economic migrants, and will he seek to advance them elsewhere as soon as he possibly can?

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. We do not want to use hotels in any part of the country; we want to tackle the issue at its source. I understand his constituents' concerns with respect to the hotel in Wiltshire. As I understand it, a smaller number of individuals have been accommodated there than he has perhaps been advised and the local authority was informed in advance, but that does not diminish his constituents' concerns. I am happy to talk to him to see what we can do to end that at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 is profoundly counterproductive legislation, as illustrated by the fact that, since it was passed,

the number of dangerous crossings has reached a record high. The Act includes the so-called inadmissibility clause, but the fact that the Government have failed to negotiate a returns agreement with a single European country means that just 21 out of 18,000 inadmissible people have been returned. Sending 300 asylum seekers to Rwanda will not even touch the sides of that 18,000. Does the Minister recognise the inadequacy of the legislation? Will he explain why the Government's utterly self-defeating approach has led directly to the British taxpayer footing an extra bill of £500 million?

Robert Jenrick: First, whatever the inadequacies of the current system, they would be far worse if the Opposition were in power—in fact, the backlog of cases was 450,000 when the last Labour Government handed over to us. They have opposed every tough measure that we have taken, including the Nationality and Borders Act. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that Act did not go far enough, I will welcome his support next year when we bring forward further and even tougher legislation. We will make sure that we secure the borders and control migration. He cannot see the difference between people genuinely fleeing persecution and economic migrants. He is testing the will of the British people; we will take action.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My casework in Glasgow Central speaks to the fundamentally broken asylum system, and a failing immigration system more widely, as other types of applications are regularly delayed and people are left waiting for years. The barrister Colin Yeo suggests that, to get the asylum backlog down to 20,000, the Home Office would need to make 8,000 decisions a month. In the year to September, only 16,400 decisions were made in total, so precisely how will the Minister meet his target?

Robert Jenrick: Last week, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out our plan to re-engineer the process and hire more decision makers. It is about not just people and resource, but ensuring that the process is faster and less bureaucratic, and that the guidance is cut and simplified. If the hon. Lady wants to help us with the issue, perhaps she will get on to her colleagues in the Scottish Government, because today in Scotland, in contrast with the rest of the United Kingdom, only one city—Glasgow—is doing its fair share and taking asylum seekers. In the whole of Scotland, only a dozen hotels outside of Glasgow are taking asylum seekers, which is not fair and equitable. She might sound pious, but her words and rhetoric are not matched by action from the Scottish Government.

Alison Thewliss: Local authorities in Scotland are reticent to take more because they know that the UK Government are not funding asylum seeker provision properly, and that pressed budgets due to another round of austerity are coming down the road, as the Minister knows just fine. Can he confirm that the Home Office is recruiting asylum decision makers from people in customer service and sales positions at McDonald's and Aldi who have no prior experience of the asylum system, who are consulting Lonely Planet guides for knowledge of applicant countries, and who have described being "left to fend for themselves"?

after two days to conduct complex interviews and make life or death decisions? Is that really an adequate way to conduct sensitive decision making?

Robert Jenrick: I do not recognise anything that the hon. Lady just said. The problem with the current system is that it is too complicated and too bureaucratic. We want to simplify that, speed up those decisions and make sure that the teams are more productive. To come back to her first point, the Scottish Government are refusing to take any of the asylum seekers who are arriving in the UK on small boats, which is not right. There is a widening gulf between the actions of the Scottish Government and their rhetoric, which I ask her to consider.

Asylum System

5. **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): What steps she is taking to improve the asylum system. [902847]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): We are taking immediate action to accelerate decision making and improve our asylum system by streamlining and modernising it, including by shortening interviews, removing unnecessary interviews, making the guidance more accessible, and dealing with cases more swiftly when they can be certified as manifestly unfounded.

Caroline Lucas: The Home Office is placing vulnerable, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in hotels in local authority areas. It is directly commissioning those hotels and other services, because it knows that local authorities do not have the funding or capacity required. Will the Home Secretary finally admit that these vulnerable children are legally the Home Office's responsibility, so that they are not left in legal limbo? Will she ensure that her Department takes a strategic approach that addresses the placement shortage, rather than its current ad hoc approach, and will she ensure that the police do all that they can to keep searching for those children who have gone missing and have yet to be relocated?

Suella Braverman: We take very seriously the position of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children—and indeed of children, full stop. Safeguarding them is of the utmost importance to all authorities, and to the Home Office, when it comes to decision making. We will shortly look at the funding arrangement for local authorities' support of these children, so that their needs are properly met.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Potentially one of the best parts of our asylum system is the safe route created for Afghans who helped British forces during the war in Afghanistan. They are often full of professional skills, speak good English, and could make a huge contribution to this country, if they were allowed to move on with their life. Will my right hon. and learned Friend give me a report on progress on getting more of these Afghan citizens out of hotels, and allowing them to get on with their life and to contribute to our society?

Suella Braverman: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We support those who have come to the United Kingdom through designated schemes such as the Afghan relocations and assistance policy, and those people who

supported allied forces in Afghanistan. Far too many of those Afghan nationals are being accommodated in hotels; on that, he is right. That is why we are moving very quickly. We are working with the Ministry of Defence, and are looking at all options, including, for example, service family accommodation, to properly accommodate a cohort of Afghans, so that they can move on with their life and settle peacefully here.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): In 2020, the Home Office secured just 12 convictions a month for people smuggling into the UK. In 2021, that fell to eight a month and, in the first half of 2022, it fell to just three a month. The smuggler gangs have proliferated, and the dangerous boat crossings that put lives at risk are up twentyfold, yet the number of criminals paying the price for their crime has collapsed. Why has the Home Secretary totally failed to take action against the criminal gangs?

Suella Braverman: Let me point out who has totally failed to take any action against the criminal gangs: the right hon. Lady and the Labour party. I am really enjoying the shadow Home Secretary's reinvention over the past weeks and months, but despite her trying to sound tough on illegal migration and people smugglers, Labour voted against our new offences for prosecuting the people smugglers who are causing the problem on the channel. Labour voted against tougher sentences that enable us to deport foreign rapists and foreign drug dealers. Labour would scrap our Rwanda scheme. Yesterday, the right hon. Lady did not even know whether illegal entry was an offence. The reality is that Labour has no plan whatever on illegal migration; it is against our plan, and all it wants is open borders.

Yvette Cooper: The Home Secretary had no response on the total collapse in prosecutions, and she has had 12 years in charge. She says that the asylum system is broken; well, who broke it? Ministers have been running the system for the last 12 years, in which they have made things worse. Since the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 came into force, the number of people arriving by dangerous boat has reached a record high, so their legislation has not worked. The Prime Minister promised extra money for the National Crime Agency, but two days after he made that announcement, the Home Office does not know how much that money is, and the Treasury has not agreed anything. Can the Home Secretary tell us how much additional funding there will be for the National Crime Agency, and where it is coming from? On the Conservatives' watch, a multimillion-pound criminal industry has grown along our border, and while Ministers fuff around, gangs are making profit and people are drowning.

Suella Braverman: I am proud of the announcement that the Prime Minister made last week, setting out a comprehensive, methodical and compassionate approach to dealing with illegal migration and stopping the boats crossing the channel, dealing with the asylum backlog, responding to the cohort of people who have come here illegally from Albania, operationalising our Rwanda agreement and ensuring that ultimately we crack down on the people smugglers through better operational command on the channel. The right hon. Lady needs to

get with the programme. I invite her to reverse her opposition to our plan, come up with a methodical plan and then let us have a proper conversation.

Tier 1 Investor Visas: Review

6. **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Ind): When her Department plans to publish the review of tier 1 investor visas. [902848]

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): This question has been raised on many occasions, including, funnily enough, by me in a former incarnation. I am pleased to say that we are approaching the moment when I will be able to satisfy not only the hon. Gentleman's but my desires.

Neil Coyle: Sounds fascinating, Mr Speaker, but the Minister—whom I congratulate on his role—knows that this review was commissioned nearly five years ago, so it is pathetic not to be able to give us a direct answer on when it is coming. Contrary to today's rhetoric on securing borders, can he confirm that this scheme quickly became a security risk to this country, with no fewer than 10 Russians who were approved under the scheme now being sanctioned by the UK, and that more than 6,000 others granted tier 1 visa status are now being reviewed as a security risk to this country?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Member makes some solid points about the dangers of the involvement of certain states—in this case, Russia—in the United Kingdom. He should also be aware that the visa scheme closed in February 2022, and the response to Russian aggression or Russian influence in this country has been pretty robust. Indeed, since 2019, we have increased spending on the National Crime Agency by 30% and £200 million extra has gone in. As he knows, there is a long way to go and that is exactly what I am going to be doing over the next few years.

Asylum Seekers: Support

7. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to support asylum seekers while their applications are being processed. [902849]

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): Appropriate support is provided to asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute while applications are outstanding. Asylum seekers have access to the NHS, and children in family units to full-time education. They can obtain further assistance via the Migrant Help support line.

Rachael Maskell: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and British Red Cross have highlighted how 13,000 individuals have been trafficked into modern slavery, and the fact that they are not in regular employment being a risk. As a result, will the Minister ensure that local authorities have the funds to put on a full programme for asylum seekers while they are waiting, but also that there are pilot schemes so that those people can have access to the labour market?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady and I have met to discuss this issue, and I am grateful to her for her thoughts and for the good work that has been done in York. We do not agree that those awaiting asylum

decisions should have access to the labour market. We think that that could be a further pull factor to the UK. However, there are other ways in which asylum seekers can make a positive contribution to society, for example, through volunteering, and we want to work with local authorities and other stakeholders to see whether we can pursue those.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): No one would deny that France is a safe country, so should not those genuinely fleeing persecution be claiming asylum in France, rather than paying people traffickers to bring them across the channel in small boats in dangerous circumstances?

Robert Jenrick: As ever, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those claiming asylum should do so in the first safe country they pass through, and France is demonstrably a safe country. The system that my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary and I want to build is one whereby those who come here illegally have no route to a life in the UK and are taken for their claims to be heard in third countries such as Rwanda, and we focus our resources as a country on targeted resettlement schemes and safe routes, like those that we have done so well in recent years in respect of Ukraine, Afghanistan and Syria.

Ukrainian Nationals: Visas and Support

9. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What steps she is taking to help improve (a) access to visas and (b) support for Ukrainian nationals. [902853]

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): Applications for the UK's three bespoke Ukraine schemes are online, have no fee and no salary or language requirements. Nearly 150,000 visas have been issued to Ukrainians since the start of Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion. The UK Visas and Immigration service aims to decide those applications within five days, unless there are exceptional circumstances. Generally, we are now meeting that standard.

Stuart C. McDonald: Ukrainian MPs who have met colleagues here have repeatedly asked for improvements to UK visit visa processes. Visitors from Ukraine must either go to Poland twice—first for biometrics and then to collect the visa—or wait there for several weeks. Will the Minister look at what can be done to make it simpler for those brave politicians and other Ukrainian citizens visiting their families here to access the necessary visa?

Robert Jenrick: I am in contact with a number of Ukrainian politicians who have raised exactly that point with me and, indeed, the issue of those serving in the Ukrainian armed forces who might wish to visit relatives here while on a short period of leave. I am giving that further consideration.

Immigration Policies: Impact on Scotland

11. **Ms Anum Qaisar** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What assessment she has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the Government's immigration policies on the (a) population of and (b) availability of labour in Scotland. [902855]

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): Our points-based system, with a wide range of eligible occupations spanning many economic sectors, works for the whole of the United Kingdom by welcoming people to fill skills gaps, support our public services and boost our economy. As noted by the Migration Advisory Committee's annual report, immigration policy cannot be a complete solution to population movements within the UK, or labour shortages. It is for the Scottish Government to use their policy levers to address those issues more effectively.

Ms Qaisar: One of my constituents is a renewable energy researcher from Syria, and he is struggling with the Government's restrictive policies on the employment of asylum seekers. He is unable to work or pursue further study in his field. Given that the shortage of labour impacts all sectors of the economy, does the Minister agree that the UK Government should make the rules on asylum seekers seeking employment less restrictive to support the Scottish labour market?

Robert Jenrick: No, I do not, because we want to ensure that deterrence is diffused throughout our asylum system. That means making the UK a significantly less attractive destination for asylum seekers, and particularly for those asylum shopping, than our EU neighbours. For that reason, we do not want to see asylum seekers working in the British economy. We want to see their cases decided as quickly as possible. If they are approved, of course they should be welcomed into the UK and make a positive contribution to British society. If they are declined, they should be removed.

County Lines

12. **Dean Russell (Watford) (Con):** What progress her Department has made on tackling county lines drugs gangs. [902856]

15. **Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con):** What progress her Department has made on tackling county lines drugs gangs. [902859]

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): The Government are determined to crack down on county lines gangs who are exploiting our children and devastating communities. That is why we have invested £145 million in our county lines programme over three years. That is delivering results. Since 2019, the programme has resulted in over 2,900 drug dealing lines being closed down, including over 8,000 arrests. That is important work and it is continuing.

Dean Russell: I recently took part in a dawn raid with Watford police officers as part of a national operation to crack down on serious organised crime. There are of course clear victims involved in crime but, as I wore my stab vest, I contemplated the dangerous situation that we were about to enter. Can my right hon. Friend confirm what support is being put in place to keep our brave police officers safe in such situations, including mental health support for the horrific scenes that they may see in their jobs daily, and support when they encounter dangerous criminals?

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for taking part in the dawn raid, which I hope was a resounding success. I share his concerns about the mental health of police officers, who are often exposed to dangerous conditions and situations. The police covenant board, which I chair, met just a few weeks ago, and many of the work streams are designed to help police officers deal with mental health pressures. We have instituted a new chief medical officer position to look after serving and retired police officers, which is extremely important, and I am working closely with the Police Federation to ensure that the right support is in place.

Antony Higginbotham: In Burnley, our neighbourhood policing taskforce has been doing great work breaking down doors, disrupting gangs and arresting those responsible for dealing drugs. A key driver of that is the Government's combating drugs strategy, but most of the new funding under the strategy is geared towards treatment and prevention, which, while important, will not be effective without the deterrent of tough enforcement. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me and the Lancashire police and crime commissioner to talk about what more we might be able to do to make the strategy even better?

Chris Philp: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend and his colleagues from Lancashire. He is quite right that there are three elements to the combating drugs strategy. One is treatment. It is important to treat drug addiction, which is the underlying cause of a great deal of offending behaviour. In addition to ensuring that we are treating people, we need to enforce, too. That is one reason why we are recruiting more police officers. I think his local Lancashire force already has an extra 362 officers, which is well on the way to the extra 509 officers it is due to have by March next year. We are also increasing resources in Border Force to stop drugs getting into the country. There are now, I think, over 10,000 Border Force officers, up from about 7,500 in 2016. So, lots of extra resources are going into enforcement and policing, as well as treatment, but both are important.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Smashing the county lines business model and breaking up the gangs has to be a top priority, but of course it is still attractive to far too many young people. At the heart of the model is the exploitation of vulnerable young children. What more cross-agency work does the Minister think could be done that is not yet being done to ensure that a life of criminality is not a viable option?

Chris Philp: I agree entirely with the sentiment that the hon. Gentleman expresses. It is vital to stop younger people, perhaps early and mid-teenagers, falling into gang culture. Very often that is because they have suffered from family breakdown or are in difficult social circumstances. One action we are taking, which we need to accelerate and increase, is introducing violence reduction units. They are designed to identify individual young people at risk of falling into gangs, including county lines activities, and to take interventions, whether through social services, education or other interventions, to try to put them back on the right track. That is a Home Office-funded programme that we intend to continue, but the diagnosis the hon. Gentleman makes is exactly right.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): On that very point, last week I met an inspiring group of young students at West Thames College who are studying full time and having to work two or three jobs to make ends meet. It has not been easy for them. The message they asked me to bring here was that the best way to protect young people from going down a different route and getting sucked into county lines and violent crime is to have adequate, accessible and fully funded youth services. Does the Minister therefore regret the Government's cuts to local councils since 2010, which have led to the decimation of universal youth provision?

Chris Philp: I have already referred to the significant amounts of money being put into violence reduction units, including funding some of the activity that the hon. Lady refers to—although it is not just that, it is much wider. It is important to divert younger people away from a life of crime and a gang culture that can all too easily take hold. It is for precisely that reason that we have established the well-funded violence reduction units, including in the London constituencies that both she and I represent.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Merry Christmas to you and to all the staff.

Contrary to the current rhetoric on modern slavery, thousands of British children were enslaved for sex and crime, such as county lines gangs, this year. Of the thousands of children identified as potential slaves this year, more British children were identified as potential child slaves than any other nationality. Last year, there was one conviction for modern slavery offences involving children. A woman I work with was left waiting by the Home Office for two years to be classified as a victim of slavery after she was groomed for sex and criminally exploited in a county lines gang since the age of 13. Referring to the Home Office written statement on the national referral mechanism, can the Minister confirm what “objective factors” to evident slavery means? If the Department thinks it is easy to prove slavery, why was there only one conviction last year?

Chris Philp: A lot of work is going on in the area. We have provided £145 million of funding to investigate and tackle county lines. That work has included 2,900 county lines being shut down. Critically, it has also included 9,500 individuals, most of whom are children, being engaged with safeguarding interventions.

Essentially, the national referral mechanism is currently being overwhelmed with a large number of claims, many of which are connected with immigration proceedings. One reason that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration wants to introduce objective criteria is to ensure that we focus our resources on genuine cases like the one that the hon. Lady describes. Rather than having the system overwhelmed by many unmeritorious claims in connection with immigration matters, it is important that we focus our attention on genuine cases like the one to which she refers.

Topical Questions

T1. [902867] **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): Today I updated the House on the upcoming Protect duty, now to be called Martyn's law. The threat from terrorism is complex and evolving, and we need to stay ahead of it, including in public places. There have been horrific incidents such as the Manchester Arena bombing, which claimed the life of Martyn Hett and 21 others.

Having carefully considered the views shared in the public consultation, we have taken a huge step forward. This will be the first legislation of its kind, placing proportionate security requirements on public venues to be better prepared and better able to respond in the event of a terrorist attack. I am extremely grateful to the heroic Figen Murray and the Martyn's law campaign team, as well as to campaigners such as Brendan Cox; they have campaigned tirelessly and with great skill for this change. I also put on record my thanks to the Minister for Security for his work in getting us to this point.

Terror will never win. We will defend our values and be relentless in keeping the public safe. I hope that this new law is of some comfort to the families of victims, and a fitting tribute to Martyn, who I am sure would be proud of his mother's achievement.

Elliot Colburn: Carshalton and Wallington residents often raise concerns with me about antisocial behaviour involving vehicles, from trying car doors at night to using modified vehicles or riding mopeds dangerously. Will my right hon. and learned Friend update me on the Home Office's work to tackle that specific type of crime and antisocial behaviour?

Suella Braverman: I share my hon. Friend's concern about antisocial behaviour, whether it is vandalism, graffiti, loitering or burglary. I am pleased to say that neighbourhood crime has fallen by 20% since 2019. I am well aware that the activities he describes can really blight local communities: that is why tackling antisocial behaviour is a priority for me and for the Government. We have expanded the remit of our successful safer streets fund so that there is now dedicated funding for initiatives to combat antisocial behaviour.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): We very much welcome the Protect duty legislation, which we have heard more about today, and look forward to seeing it. I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to the families who have worked so hard to get us to this point.

The annual threat update from the director general of MI5 was explicit about the seriousness of the threat from Iran to some UK residents, yet there are still those in religious roles working and living here in the UK who are appointed directly by the Supreme Leader himself. There are also key players within the draconian Iranian regime who have business interests and assets here in the UK. What are the Government doing to make it explicit that the UK will have no part in being a haven, either for individuals or for money linked to—

Mr Speaker: Order. You know the game: the game is short questions in topicals. Please do not take advantage of the situation, because all the Back Benchers want to get in as well.

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): I am delighted that the hon. Lady has raised the question of the Iranian threat in the UK. As she knows very well, the head of MI5, Ken McCallum, has cited the issue that our country faces in this arena. He has also, however, prepared many different aspects of the National Security Bill, which will help to put the country on a much stronger footing. We have enjoyed strong cross-party co-operation on this, and I look forward to the hon. Lady's co-operating further with the Government in ensuring that this country is in a much stronger position than it has been in recent years, particularly in facing the Iranian threat, which sadly has become all too great here, quite apart from the extraordinary brutality that we are seeing in Tehran today.

T8. [902874] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Given that, under the 1951 refugee convention, if no legal and safe routes are available it is illegal to arrest and detain an asylum seeker landing on our shores at Dover, does the Minister agree that we can make as many statements and pass as many laws as we like, but unless we achieve a temporary derogation for the convention—and, if necessary, from the European Court of Human Rights on this particular issue—we will never solve the problem?

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): I appreciate the concerns that my right hon. Friend has raised. My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary will set out in more detail the Government's response to the High Court's judgment today on Rwanda, but it is the court's opinion that the Rwanda policy is consistent with the UK's obligations under both the refugee convention and the European convention on human rights.

T3. [902869] **Sir Mark Hendrick** (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): May I ask the Home Secretary whether, at the end of the year, she will reflect on the comments that she made in early October about sending asylum seekers to Rwanda? She will be aware that a 28-year-old woman from Eritrea who was 37 weeks pregnant as a result of rape was in line for deportation. Does not talk of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda being a "dream" or an "obsession" show all the sensitivity and compassion of Jeremy Clarkson?

Suella Braverman: I regret the attempt by the hon. Gentleman to lower the tone of this debate. What I will say is that I will not apologise for telling the truth about the scale of the challenge that we are facing when it comes to illegal migration, and I will also reiterate my absolute commitment to delivering on the groundbreaking agreement that we have with Rwanda. It is compassionate, it is pragmatic, and I invite the Opposition parties to support it.

T10. [902876] **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Last week the Prime Minister set out the measures that the Government will take to gain control over illegal migration, and I was pleased to note that as a result of today's ruling the Rwanda plan will be part of that. Those proposals included options to house potential asylum seekers in more suitable accommodation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that will take pressure off communities such as Middleton in my constituency, and allow the hotels that are being used for this purpose to return to their proper function?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is disgraceful that millions of pounds are being spent on housing asylum seekers in hotels. We want to end that as quickly as possible and ensure that those individuals are housed more appropriately—for example, in large sites that offer decent but never luxurious accommodation. However, the root cause is the numbers crossing the channel, and that is why policies such as the Rwanda policy, which create a clear deterrent, are so essential.

T5. [902871] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Notwithstanding the earlier contrary claim by the Immigration Minister, will the Home Secretary confirm that she fully respects the landmark 1999 ruling by the UK High Court—not some dodgy European ultra-woke ruling—in which it was confirmed that

"some element of choice is indeed open to refugees as to where they may properly claim asylum",

and that a short-term stopover en route to another country should not cause them to forfeit the right to claim asylum on arrival at a destination?

Suella Braverman: I welcome the High Court judgment, which states that the overall policy relating to Rwanda is lawful. It is in line with our international law agreements, and it is a rational policy choice that the UK Government have taken. We look forward to working more closely with Rwanda to deliver it.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I warmly welcome the legal ruling on the Rwanda plan, and also the reforms to the modern slavery system as part of the overall work to deter those involved in small boat crossings. Does the Home Secretary agree that another way of tackling the backlog would be to speed up the local authority pilot programme for processing claims relating to child victims of modern slavery, many of them vulnerable county lines drug gangs children? Would that not improve support for those children as well as helping to clear the backlog?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend has been an eloquent and knowledgeable campaigner on this issue. She has spoken to me about how we can better ensure that young people who are exploited by criminal gangs are looked after properly. We will take forward more pilots with local authorities next year. I will take her advice under consideration as we design them.

T6. [902872] **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): The success rate of asylum applications from Afghanistan, Syria and Eritrea stands at 98%, and at over 80% for those from Sudan and Iran. Can the Minister commit to an accelerated decision process, especially for people from those countries?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out last week that we will redesign and speed up the asylum decision-making process. There will be a particular focus on those individuals with the highest grant rate, and those with the lowest grant rates, such as Albanians, who should be removed from the country. What we will not do is institute a policy of blanket approval, which, in essence, is what John Reid and previous Labour Home Secretaries did.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Essex, our excellent police, fire and crime commissioner and I are concerned that out of 2,500 reported rape cases last year, only 70 were prosecuted. Can the Minister encourage the police to work more closely with secondary schools to ensure that girls who have been victims of rape know that their privacy and safety will be protected if they come forward to give evidence?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): We have allocated £125 million across England and Wales through the safer streets fund and the safety of women at night fund, including £550,000 to invest in my right hon. Friend's constituency. She works very hard on this issue. Work and engagement are ongoing with schools in the Chelmsford area, including the delivery of awareness sessions on healthy relationships and consent, and work with 15 and 16-year-olds who attend Chelmsford City football club.

T7. [902873] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): When will the Home Secretary finally accept, rather than waffle about new laws, that the Home Office is a complete mess? Quite apart from the asylum shambles, people renewing their visas are waiting months or years. Then, they have to wait again to get their biometric residence permit card, if they get printed. Far too many people have lost holidays because of waits for passports. When will she get a grip of her Department?

Suella Braverman: I strongly disagree with the right hon. Gentleman's assertion, surprisingly. On crime, we have seen a 20% fall in violent crime and neighbourhood crime and a 30% fall in domestic burglary since 2019. We see record numbers of police officers on our streets—something that everyone on the Opposition Benches voted against. When it comes to migration, I am incredibly proud of what this Government have achieved so far: the groundbreaking agreement with Rwanda, which is compassionate, pragmatic and lawful; and a plan to go further and deal with the problem.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's work with the Prime Minister on tackling illegal immigration and the statement last week. The statement talked about fairness; I think she knows very well that Stoke-on-Trent feels that it has not been treated fairly. The Minister mentioned that Scotland could take a few more asylum seekers if they were really concerned about these things. Other parts of the country could do the same.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are almost as many hotels in use in Stoke-on-Trent as in the whole of Scotland, bar the city of Glasgow. Fair and equitable distribution involves Scotland paying its fair share. We are acutely aware of the concerns of my hon. Friend and her colleagues in Stoke-on-Trent. I met the leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council last week to hear them directly. We will do all we can to support them.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): In the past decade it was normal to write to the Home Office about an immigration case and get a reply within six weeks. That went up to 10 to 12 weeks. It is now running at three to four months—not to get a decision, just an initial response. How sustainable is that?

Robert Jenrick: I am always happy to take up cases for right hon. and hon. Members. I would just say, however, that the Home Office's standards for visa applications are now back in line with its customer service standards. A large number of staff were taken off those cases in order to support the Homes for Ukraine and other humanitarian schemes, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree with, but the service standards are now being met.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): A great many of my residents raise with me the issue of cross-channel migration. Following this morning's High Court ruling, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Rwanda scheme, when it gets the green light, will be a fair scheme that will act as a deterrent and help to allay the concerns of Gedling residents?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The point of the Rwanda scheme is to provide a significant deterrent, so that those coming here illegally never find a route to life here in the UK and so that we can focus our resources as a country on supporting those who really need to be here, through targeted resettlement schemes such as those for Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): The production of industrial hemp in my constituency offers real promise and opportunity for crop diversification and soil improvement, but the growers are limited by Home Office rules around tetrahydrocannabinol protections. There is no need to worry about that, so can I invite the Home Secretary to come and discuss the matter with my farmers and to ensure that the law is changed to let them produce not only the stalk and the seeds, but the flowers and the leaves?

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): The Government approach illegal drugs—or drugs of any kind—under advice from the Advisory Council on the Abuse of Drugs. If the hon. Member has detailed points that he would like to submit in relation to this, he can write to me and I would be happy to look into it.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I want to give credit to the Marling School students who got me in to talk about migration. Those smart, constructive young people really understand the complexities and I know that they will welcome the recent announcements, but they also expect me to keep pushing for improvement. I am concerned that MPs, councils and councillors are still some of the last people to find out when asylum seekers are placed in hotels in their constituencies. How is the Home Office working with the companies that have been contracted to source and organise hotels in rural areas, and is there day-to-day oversight?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend and I have worked together with respect to some accommodation in her constituency. We have now implemented far better engagement criteria with the Home Office, which will ensure that there should always be engagement with the Member of Parliament and the local authority in advance of placing asylum seekers in a particular place. But it is important to stress once again the immense pressure that our system is now under as a result of the number of people crossing the channel illegally, hence our need to take bold measures such as our Rwanda partnership.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My constituent's wife is still stuck in Afghanistan with their two children, who are British citizens, and they cannot travel to safe routes for obvious security reasons. I have made untold representations to the Home Office about this. Will the Minister agree to look into this case on my behalf if I get the details to him today?

Robert Jenrick: Yes, I would be happy to.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): In 2010 and 2015, Dudley town centre was the scene of some very ugly riots, with the British National party, the National Front and the English Defence League converging on the town centre. On that basis alone, will the Home Secretary ask her officials to reconsider the proposals for siting up to 144 illegal immigrants in a hotel—the Superior Hotel—not 100 yards away from this location?

Robert Jenrick: As a result of the good work undertaken by the Home Office in recent weeks to ensure that the Manston site in Kent is operating appropriately, we have now been able to implement some simple criteria, including risk to public order or disorder, when choosing

new hotels. If there is compelling evidence in that regard, it should be taken into account by the Home Office, but there are no easy choices in this matter. The UK is essentially full, and it is extremely hard to find new hotels or other forms of accommodation.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Can the Minister confirm that no citizen will require an electronic travel authorisation to travel from one part of the United Kingdom to another part of the United Kingdom, and that there will be no equivalent to an Irish sea border for citizens travelling from Northern Ireland to Great Britain or for citizens travelling from GB to Northern Ireland?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that point, because concerns that need to be allayed have recently been raised in some quarters. There will be no checks at the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland for tourist and other visas. His other points are absolutely correct. It is important that we proceed with our own ETA, as the European Union will be proceeding with its own version next year. This will enable us to improve security throughout the UK by ensuring some dangerous individuals do not enter.

Strep A Treatments: Supply

3.40 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the supply of strep A treatments.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I know families are concerned about the recent outbreak of strep A in children. Although the vast majority of strep A cases are mild and can easily be treated with antibiotics, a small number of children have gone on to develop serious infections.

The UK Health Security Agency has already declared a national enhanced incident to co-ordinate our public response. Increased demand has led to some temporary supply issues, but I reassure Members on both sides of the House that we have stock of antibiotics and have taken a number of steps to deal with some of the supply issues.

First, we have worked at pace to help to ensure that there are supplies of vital medicines to meet the increased demand. Earlier this month, we convened roundtables with manufacturers of the preferred treatment, penicillin V, and with major UK wholesalers. We continue to work with manufacturers and wholesalers to boost supply to meet demand. The key issue is getting stock to pharmacies across the country. We have brought forward stock to make sure it gets to where it is needed, and we are expediting deliveries. Deliveries to wholesalers and pharmacies continues to be made, with more expected in the coming days and weeks.

Secondly, we have issued eight serious shortage protocols to allow pharmacists to supply not only alternative forms of penicillin, but alternative antibiotics. This will make things easier for pharmacists, general practitioners and, of course, patients. We have also added a number of antibiotics to our list of medicines that cannot be exported or hoarded.

Finally, we have updated advice across the board. Further guidance was given to GPs and pharmacists on Friday as part of the new SSPs. My Department has provided advice to colleagues in primary and secondary care on the management of the current supply issues. We have also held a cross-party briefing for MPs, and a “Dear Colleague” letter will go out later today.

I know this is a worrying time for families across the country, but I reassure them and people across the healthcare sector that we are managing the higher-than-normal number of strep A cases this winter and we have a range of medicines available.

Daisy Cooper: Across the country, parents are worried sick about the sharp rise in strep A infections. Tragically, strep A has caused the death of at least 19 children since September.

Last Thursday, just a few days after insisting there were no shortages, the Government finally admitted that there were indeed serious shortages of three penicillin medicines and issued serious shortage protocols to give pharmacists emergency powers to deal with supply issues. Why on earth did they take so long?

The Government will have seen the data on the number of prescriptions for strep A antibiotics, which started to rise more than a month ago. Health professionals, including Leyla Hannbeck, the chief executive of the Association of Independent Multiple Pharmacies, have been raising the alarm publicly for more than two weeks, and I called for a strep A summit to resolve the supply issues. Because the Government did not come clean sooner about the shortage of antibiotics, parents who are worried about their children have been left to travel to multiple pharmacies, GPs have had to find time to rewrite prescriptions and A&E departments have been overwhelmed by anxious parents and children who cannot access medical help when they need it.

Why have the Government taken so long to act? Did they not look at prescription data, or did they just ignore it? Why did the Secretary of State insist on television that there were no shortages, when GPs, pharmacists, directors of public health and parents all said that there were? After shortages of lateral flow tests, hormone replacement therapy and so on—you name it—why are we in this position again? The Government seem incapable of forward planning, and we are stuck in a shortage groundhog day. Can the Minister update us on the Competition and Markets Authority investigation into the sharp rise in the prices of antibiotics?

Finally, we are in the lead-up to Christmas. Pharmacists have told me that some key contacts in the manufacturing companies are already on leave for the Christmas holiday. Families are making difficult decisions about the safety of their children and extended family. What action will the Government take now to ensure that families across the country can access the antibiotics they might need over the entire Christmas period?

Maria Caulfield: I reassure the hon. Lady that we have not waited to act. We have already issued serious shortage protocols, which are routine mechanisms when there is pressure on supplies. We have the stock of antibiotics in the country—as I outlined in my opening remarks, it is about supply issues. We are seeing five to six times the amount of antibiotics being prescribed at the moment. That is because the UK Health Security Agency has issued guidance to GPs, A&Es and healthcare professionals to lower the threshold of when they would normally give antibiotics. We are seeing significantly increased use of antibiotics. That is in addition to the prophylactic use of antibiotics by directors of public health, if they have had an outbreak locally. That is why we issued the initial SSPs already a couple of weeks ago so that pharmacists had flexibility in how they dispensed that medication. It is why on Friday we issued the new SSPs, which allow amoxicillin, clarithromycin, flucloxacillin, cefalexin, co-amoxiclav and erythromycin to be issued instead, if pharmacists do not have Penicillin V on their shelves. We are being as flexible as possible to give pharmacists that scope.

We are monitoring this issue on a daily basis. May I reassure people that while these are higher than usual incidences for this time of year, overall for this season we are not yet at the 2017, 2018 levels, where we had a significantly higher number of deaths? Strep A occurs not just in—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members do not want to listen. I think I have said enough.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I am pleased to hear that there are adequate supplies of penicillin and amoxicillin. My hon. Friend will be aware that some

tetracyclines are less effective with certain ethnic groups. She is right in saying, is she not, that most strep A infections are not serious. Does she agree that we should be encouraging parents to give their children flu vaccinations? Usually, serious streptococcal infections occur when someone has been run down through a viral infection first.

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is right to advise people to take their flu vaccination. What I was trying to say, but the Opposition did not really want to hear, was that strep A occurs in all age groups. Actually, the highest number of deaths we see are in over-65s. It is important to get the message out that this issue does not just affect children. My hon. Friend is right. The flu vaccine is something that should always be recommended for winter. He is also right that the alternative antibiotics that I read out have been recommended by UKHSA, and we have taken its clinical advice.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Secretary of State.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): May I wish you, Mr Speaker, and all staff of the House a merry Christmas? I also thank the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) for securing this urgent question. I put on record my deepest condolences to the families of the children who have tragically passed away with strep A. The news that cases are surging has been deeply worrying for parents of children showing symptoms, and it comes at a time when the NHS is facing unprecedented pressure.

We first heard about shortages of antibiotics to treat strep A almost two weeks ago, but when my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition raised the issue with the Prime Minister, he said:

“There are no current shortages of drugs available”.—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 333.]

At the same time, parents were going from pharmacy to pharmacy to find the antibiotics their children had been prescribed, and they simply were not available. Why did the Prime Minister not know that there was a problem, when it was plain to see for parents of young people across the country? Had the Government been aware of the problem sooner, surely they could have acted to secure supplies earlier? The Minister said that there has been no shortage, just a supply chain issue. For a parent turning up to a pharmacy and finding that it does not have the antibiotics, it does not make much difference whether this is called a shortage or a supply chain issue, as the antibiotics are not there. The Government must get a grip on this situation and be honest with the public about the reality on the ground.

In addition to the export ban, will the Minister tell the House exactly what the Government are doing to shore up supply of drugs needed to treat strep A? During the past couple of weeks, as desperate parents have been looking for antibiotics, prices have disgracefully shot up. Will the Minister assure the House that the Government will come down like a ton of bricks on any company found to be exploiting this situation by jacking up prices for medication?

This is about access to not just medicine, but GPs and A&E. Parents concerned about symptoms are advised to seek prompt medical advice, yet about one in seven patients cannot get a GP appointment when they need one,

a record 2 million patients are made to wait a month before they see a GP and A&E departments are overwhelmed. So will the Minister assure parents of children with symptoms of strep A that they will be able to see a GP when they need to? Finally, given that there are strikes planned in the NHS this week, may I ask the Minister whether the Secretary of State plans to update the House tomorrow and explain the Government's disgraceful inaction on that issue too?

Maria Caulfield: Let me reassure Members that, as I said in my opening remarks, there is no shortage of antibiotics to deal with strep A. There have been pressures on supplies; there have been five to six times the amount of prescriptions that are normally issued at this time of year. Let me give the House an idea of the sorts of figures we are talking about. This season, we have seen 74 deaths across all age groups in England, with 16 of them, unfortunately, having been deaths of children under 18—the vast majority have been among the over-65s. In the 2017-18 peak, we had 355 deaths of all ages, with 27 of those being deaths of children under 18. That just gives us an idea of the scale of the difference compared with the peak of 2017-18. We have put significant measures in place to expedite that supply. Manufacturers are ramping up production lines. Deliveries to pharmacies have been happening every day, but often when the supplies arrive there they go very quickly. That is why we have issued the SSPs already, so that pharmacies can allow the different medication to be dispensed, and the alternative antibiotics are there as well. May I also put on record my thanks to GPs and A&E staff, who have seen record numbers of people, particularly children, with concerns about strep A? We did lower the threshold to prescribe antibiotics and they have gone above and beyond in seeing as many children as they can, as quickly as possible.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): Group A streptococcus has been associated as a trigger for PANDAS—paediatric autoimmune neuropsychiatric disorders associated with streptococcal infections—a distressing autoimmune neuropsychiatric disorder in children. I welcome the planned PANDAS surveillance study, which will, no doubt, help assess the impact of this outbreak on children, but will the Minister meet me and other members of the all-party group that deals with this to discuss how we can develop and move towards a treatment pathway for PANDAS in the UK?

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important point. UKHSA is looking at the data on this outbreak and previous ones. I am happy to meet him to discuss that, particularly if he has details of treatment options he feels are not being pursued at the moment.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that no production lines in UK pharmaceutical suppliers are operating, because we have contracted out all our supplies to China and India, which manufacture all the drugs? Both countries have not signed up to the pharmaceutical inspection and co-operation scheme, which ensures homogenisation of good manufacturing practices. The UK manufacturers have to apply that whereas the overseas manufacturers do not. Therefore, we have over 10 manufacturers of pharmaceuticals who are not able to produce the right

[Mr Khalid Mahmood]

antibiotics because of the unfair discrimination against them by the Government. Will she ensure that this is put right before Christmas so that our local, British pharmaceutical manufacturers can produce the right antibiotics to give to all our children who need them so desperately?

Maria Caulfield: Perhaps if the hon. Gentleman had not been heckling me throughout my opening remarks, he would have heard that we are working with manufacturers and wholesalers across the country. Manufacturers are opening up new production lines and those supplies will be hitting pharmacy shelves very soon.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I recently visited Broomfield Hospital and was concerned to hear that the paediatric A&E was seeing three times as many children as was normal for this time of year. Given that strep A is often a complication of flu, which can be harmful to children, and given that the vaccine take-up, especially of two and three-year-olds, is so low, will my hon. Friend join me in urging all parents, especially those of two and three-year-olds, to go out and get that protection against both flu and strep A by getting their child the flu vaccine?

Maria Caulfield: My right hon. Friend is right to encourage parents to take their children for the flu vaccine. She is also right to highlight the level of demand in her local A&E. Parents are doing the right thing. If they are concerned about their children, they should get them seen as early as possible. For those in doubt about the symptoms: they are flu-like symptoms of sore throat, headache, fever, muscle aches and also a rash that can feel like sandpaper. If parents are concerned, they should seek medical advice.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is currently suggested that parents contact 111 or book a GP appointment if they are concerned about strep A. Yet 111 workers are already stretched and millions of parents are struggling to get GP appointments, but with strep A there is no time to be wasted. What are the Government doing to ensure that diagnosis and treatment are expedited, because no more families should be facing the prospect of mourning this Christmas?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Lady is right to raise that matter. Every day, we monitor the number of appointments with GPs, A&E visits, pharmacy visits and the impact that those are having on our stock levels of antibiotics, and the number of incidents of positive cases. Scarlet fever is a notifiable disease, so we are able to track this fairly easily, but she is right on this. GPs and A&E doctors are going above and beyond to see as many as possible of the people coming forward with concerns.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): It is good to hear that there is no shortage of antibiotics, and I know that many parents in my constituency will be reassured by that. None the less, from speaking to constituents, I do know that they have had to travel further than normal to get the antibiotics that have been prescribed by a GP. What steps are the Government taking to

make sure that antibiotics are delivered to a range of places, particularly those areas where there is a larger outbreak, because that is where they will be needed the most?

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. While we do not have a shortage, there are, as I have clearly outlined, supply issues. When deliveries are made to pharmacies, those pharmacies very quickly run out because of the sheer scale of demand. I say to parents that the new SSPs issued on Friday will allow pharmacists to replace the prescription antibiotic with a number of antibiotics. If they go in with a prescription for penicillin B and are given amoxicillin, clarithromycin, flucloxacillin, cephalexin, co-amoxiclav or erythromycin, for example, that is because they are recommended as alternative antibiotics that can adequately treat strep A.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am sorry, Mr Speaker, but you caught me unawares there. I was expecting to go up and down automatically until the very end.

I thank the Minister for her answers, but this is not only about strep A. Will she confirm that discussions have taken place with Army medics, so that they can step into the breach as GPs are under pressure? One parent in my constituency simply refused to leave the GP's office until he was seen, and quite rightly so, as his daughter had scarlet fever and needed an immediate antibiotic injection. I do not blame the GPs, because it is clear that they need more support. Can this be made available? The Army medics are perhaps the solution.

Maria Caulfield: I am sorry to hear about the problems that the hon. Gentleman's constituent has had in accessing help. We do recognise that there are serious pressures. Winter is a busy time for GPs in the best of years, but this year, with strep A, UKHSA and officials are encouraging parents to come forward, and parents are doing exactly the right thing. We are working with GPs, and NHS England is reaching out to primary care colleagues to see what additional support is needed to meet that demand.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I think the Minister's definition of a "shortage" is different from that of parents. One parent in my constituency got in touch with me last week. She was a local mum of a 13-month-old boy who has been diagnosed with strep A. After a frantic search for antibiotics—during which the doctors changed the prescription—she managed, in her desperation, to get a third of the necessary prescription. Since then she has been trying pharmacies repeatedly to get the remainder. Today, she runs out, and she still does not have the drugs that she needs. What is the Minister's message for that mum trying to keep that little boy safe?

Maria Caulfield: We recognise that there are supply issues with pharmacies. That is why pharmacists have had the flexibility since before last week to adjust doses and preparations. Since Friday they have also been able to issue alternative antibiotics. I would say to the hon. Lady's constituent to go back to her pharmacist, who will be able to give her an alternative supply.¹

1. [Official Report, 20 December 2022, Vol. 725, c. 3MC.]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Parents right across my constituency have been raising concerns with me about the rise in strep A cases. I spoke to a reception class teacher last week who told me that more than half the reception class were off with a variety of winter diseases, including strep A. Parents tell me that when they see the symptoms, they struggle to get a GP appointment because of the logjam in the primary care system. What steps is the Minister taking to make more GP appointments available so that parents are not left waiting?

Maria Caulfield: Where there has been an outbreak in a local area, many directors of public health are starting children in classes or in schools with known cases on prophylactic antibiotics, preventing strep A in the first place. If the hon. Lady has a case in her constituency, I urge her to talk to her director of public health; it is a clinical decision, but they may be able to start pupils in those classes on prophylactic doses.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): On Friday, with my local pharmaceutical committee, I visited Whitworth Pharmacy in Elswick in my constituency and saw the fantastic work it does to support health in the community. I also saw the empty shelves where the antibiotics that would normally be used to treat strep A should be. The Minister does not seem to realise that a supply issue means a shortage on the shelves. I learned too that pharmacies are being asked to pay up to £19 for a box of antibiotics that would normally cost £2, and there is no commitment from the Government to reimburse that amount. What immediate assurances can she give that local pharmacies will not be priced out of supporting their communities?

Maria Caulfield: Let me be absolutely clear that no supplier should be using this as an opportunity to exploit the NHS. The Competition and Markets Authority is looking at any complaints about price increases and we are working with the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee at pace to review the concessionary price arrangements and see how they can be improved.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): If parents right across the country are reporting to their MPs that they are having to go from pharmacy to pharmacy to get the right antibiotics, there is a shortage. If pharmacies are reporting that they are running out of supplies as soon as they come in because they already have high demand, there is a shortage. It was not until last Thursday that the serious shortage protocols were introduced. I raised this issue with the Government on 6 December at health questions, and I was told that there was no shortage. As well as repeating her answer that there is no shortage, can the Minister give us an assurance that the antibiotics are available in liquid form, which is suitable for children?

Maria Caulfield: Just to confirm, the five SSPs issued on Friday were in addition to the three issued previously. If colleagues are having problems with the pharmacies in their constituencies not getting stock, I must say that I held a cross-party meeting with MPs on this very issue not so long ago and a handful of colleagues attended. My door is open and, if people are having problems in their constituencies, I ask them to please come and see

me, because we have mechanisms in place to deal with that—but I need colleagues to let me know when we hold cross-party meetings.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Last week Hannah, a young mum from the Runcorn part of my constituency, visited nine different pharmacies looking for the appropriate medication for her four-year-old little boy. It was not available, because there is a shortage. It is time to be clear and transparent about that. The Minister should not be in denial about the reality; she should give those parents and their children reassurance by getting a grip of the situation.

Maria Caulfield: I can give parents struggling to get those antibiotics the reassurance that pharmacies are now able to dispense alternative antibiotics. I have read them out, but I can do so again: amoxicillin, clarithromycin, flucloxacillin, cefalexin, co-amoxiclav and erythromycin. We have taken action to make sure that those antibiotics are available to parents.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): There appears to be some confusion about the difference between an insufficiency of stocks and supply difficulties. Just for absolute clarity, given that the Minister has reported to the House today that demand has gone up five or six times, are there currently sufficient or insufficient stocks in the country to meet that increased demand?

Maria Caulfield: There are sufficient stocks in the country to meet demand.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The deputy chair of the British Medical Association's general practitioners committee told the Health Committee two weeks ago about the challenges faced by GPs in accessing appropriate pharmaceuticals. What are NHS planners doing to ensure that logistics are getting stocks to the appropriate place in a timely way? With strep A, we just cannot wait.

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. That is why wholesalers have expedited deliveries and increased the number of deliveries that are going to pharmacies. We are working with NHS England, with UKHSA and with pharmaceutical bodies to make sure that those supplies are getting to them. But we recognise that even with the expedited and extra deliveries there is still demand on supplies, which is why the SSPs have been issued—so that pharmacists can dispense not just alternative preparations of what has been prescribed, but alternative substitutes.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Parents in Barnsley are really worried. The Minister has said more than once that there is no shortage, but I say gently to her that that is not the experience of many of my constituents. They do not need her to refer to that simply as a supply issue; they want to hear what the Government are doing to tackle the shortage and to ensure that there are no regional disparities in access to medicine.

Maria Caulfield: I do not want to repeat myself, but we have been clear. We have been working with manufacturers and wholesalers to up production and expedite deliveries to pharmacies, but we recognised fairly early on that that was not going to be enough to

[*Maria Caulfield*]

meet demand. That is why we already had SSPs in place, so that pharmacists had some flexibility. But we recognised that that was not enough, so on Thursday and Friday we issued five new SSPs so that pharmacists had the flexibility to dispense alternative antibiotics that are as good at dealing with strep A as penicillin V. We will go further. We have more manufacturing plans to increase supply, and we also have alternative provision coming onstream in the next few days, about which I can update the House as well, so we are not just resting on our laurels. We will do whatever it takes to get those antibiotics to those who need them.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The Minister said that there are supply issues but no shortage. I am trying to be helpful here, so may I make a suggestion to improve domestic supply? I recently visited Bristol Laboratories in Peterlee in my constituency—I pay tribute to its management and workforce for their hard work—which has the facilities and the flexible capacity to supply generic medicines to the NHS at relatively short notice. It would seem advantageous to meet Bristol Laboratories and similar manufacturers. UK domestic production capacity for such medications is vital, as was demonstrated during covid. If we do not protect our sovereign manufacturing capability, we risk the UK being at the back of the queue if and when the next global supply shortage or demand surge hits.

Maria Caulfield: If the hon. Gentleman forwards to me the details, I will happily look at that. I would just point out that, as of 12 December, a number of European countries, including Ireland, France, the Netherlands and Sweden have indicated an increase this winter, particularly since September. Antibiotics and amoxicillin are both reported to be in short supply in those countries. This issue is not related solely to the United Kingdom.

Migration and Economic Development

4.9 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the UK's migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda.

One hundred million people are displaced globally. Others want to move to a different country, often for economic reasons. This presents an enormous challenge for sought-after destinations such as the United Kingdom. Since 2015, this kind and generous country has welcomed nearly 450,000 people through safe and legal routes. The British people are eager to help those in need and they support controlled migration. They have opened their homes to refugees. But they do not want open borders.

For decades the British people were told that this was immoral and that their concerns and opinions did not matter. Even today we see from certain quarters an unhealthy contempt for anyone who wants controlled migration. Such an attitude is unhelpful. Moreover, it is fanciful. We do not have infinite capacity. Already we are struggling to accommodate new arrivals, meaning that we spend millions every day in hotel bills alone.

We cannot tolerate people coming here illegally. It is not legitimate to leave a safe country such as France to seek asylum in the United Kingdom. We have to break the business model of the people-smuggling gangs. Their trade in human cargo is evil and lethal, as we were tragically reminded very recently.

There is a global migration crisis and it requires international solutions. In April, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), backed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), signed a ground-breaking migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda. They deserve enormous credit for their work on this. We agreed that people who come to the UK via dangerous, illegal and unnecessary means can be relocated to Rwanda to have their asylum claims considered there. Those in need of protection will be given up to five years of support, including education and employment training, along with help with integration, accommodation and healthcare.

Being relocated to Rwanda is not a punishment but an innovative way of addressing a major problem to redress the imbalance between illegal and legal migration routes. It will also ensure that those in genuine need of international protection are provided with it in Rwanda. It is a humane and practical alternative for those who come here through dangerous, illegal and unnecessary routes. By making it clear that they cannot expect to stay in the UK, we will deter more people from coming here and make such routes unviable.

There has been a great deal of misinformation about Rwanda. I visited Rwanda myself several years ago. She is a state party to the 1951 United Nations refugee convention and the seven core United Nations human rights conventions. It is a safe and dynamic country with a thriving economy. It has an excellent record of supporting refugees and vulnerable migrants. The UN has used Rwanda for the relocation of vulnerable migrants from Libya—and this was first funded by the European Union. Many migrants, including refugees, have already

built excellent lives in Rwanda. Our partnership is a significant investment in that country and further strengthens our relationship.

A myth still persists that the Home Office's permanent secretary opposed this agreement. For the record, he did not. Nor did he assert that it is definitely poor value for money. He stated, in his role as accounting officer, that the policy is regular, proper and feasible, but that there is not currently sufficient evidence to demonstrate value for money. As he would be the first to agree, it is for Ministers to take decisions having received officials' advice. Once the partnership is up and running, he will continue to monitor its efficacy, including value for money.

In June, the first plane was ready to relocate people to Rwanda. Our domestic courts—the High Court, the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court—upheld our right to send the flight. However, following an order by an out-of-hours judge in the European Court of Human Rights, the flight was cancelled. The European Court of Human Rights did not rule that the policy or relocations were unlawful, but it prohibited the removal of specific people. This was a “without notice” order and the UK was not invited to make representations to oppose it. As a result, we have been unable to operate relocation flights pending ongoing legal proceedings, but we have continued to prepare by issuing notices of intent for those eligible for relocation, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister recently outlined a comprehensive new approach to illegal migration.

A judicial review was brought against the Rwanda partnership by a number of organisations and individual asylum seekers. The first part of proceedings considered a case that the partnership is unlawful; the second part argued that UK domestic processes under the partnership are unfair; and the third part argued that the policy is contrary to data protection laws. Today in the High Court, in a judgment spanning more than 130 pages, Lord Justice Lewis and Mr Justice Swift held that it is indeed lawful for the Government to make arrangements for relocating asylum seekers to Rwanda and for their asylum claims to be determined in Rwanda rather than in the United Kingdom. The court further held that the relocation of asylum seekers to Rwanda is consistent with the refugee convention and with the statutory and other legal obligations on the Government, including the obligations imposed by the Human Rights Act 1998.

This judgment thoroughly vindicates the Rwanda partnership. Earlier today, I spoke to my Rwandan counterpart, Minister Vincent Biruta, and we confirmed our joint and steadfast resolve to deliver the partnership at scale as soon as possible. It is what the overwhelming majority of the British people want to happen. The sooner it is up and running, the sooner we will break the business model of the evil gangs and bring an end to the illegal, unnecessary and unsafe channel crossings. Now that our courts have affirmed its legality, I invite the Opposition to get behind this plan. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

4.17 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Government have failed to stop criminal gangs putting lives at risk and proliferating along our

borders; they have failed to prosecute or convict the gang members; and they have failed to take basic asylum decisions, which are down by 40% in the last six years. Instead of sorting out those problems, however, they have put forward an unworkable, unethical and extremely expensive Rwanda plan that risks making trafficking worse.

The Home Secretary describes today's court judgment as a vindication, but I wonder whether she has read it, because it sets out evidence of serious problems in Home Office decision making. It also identifies the significant financial costs of the scheme and the very limited number of people who will be covered, and certainly identifies no evidence that it will act as a deterrent or address the serious problems that we face.

The court concluded that the Home Office's decision making in each of the eight cases considered was so flawed and chaotic that those individual decisions have had to be quashed. There were cases of literally mixing up evidence and the names of individuals, so the Home Office was making decisions on the wrong people; there was confusion between teams in Glasgow and Croydon about who was deciding what and which information should be shared; and evidence of torture and trafficking was not considered. We also know that the Home Office attempted to send heavily pregnant women to Rwanda.

That is a damning indictment of the decision-making process in the Home Office, which we know is not working because no decision has been made on 98% of the small boat arrivals in the last 12 months. Ministers seem to have decided that they are so incapable of getting a grip on the asylum system and of taking asylum decisions effectively here in the UK that they want to pay a country halfway across the world to take those decisions for us.

On the lawfulness of the decision, the Court accepted that Rwanda does not have the processing capacity, including interpreters and legal support, needed to take asylum decisions, but it concluded that the agreement was still lawful because of two key points: the number of people Rwanda takes will be very limited; and lots more money will be provided by the UK Government. The Home Secretary did not tell us about any of those things. Will she now tell us, first, how many people she expects to send to Rwanda next year? Rwanda has said that it can accommodate 200 people. That is the people from 0.5% of this year's channel crossings. The Home Office itself has said that there is no evidence that the scheme will act as a deterrent, and that the scheme is unenforceable and has a high risk of fraud.

Secondly, can the Home Secretary tell us the full cost? The Court said that significant additional funding would be provided. The Government have already written Rwanda two cheques this year: one for £120 million, and another this summer for £20 million. Millions more are promised—but how much more? How much will the scheme end up costing per person? It looks as though it will be more than £1 million per person.

Thirdly, the Court judgment says that there is no evidence that the UK Government sought to investigate either the terms of the Rwanda-Israel agreement or the way it had worked in practice. Why on earth not? That agreement was abandoned, and there is evidence that it increased trafficking and the activity of criminal gangs. Convictions for people smuggling have already dropped by 75% in two years; convictions for people trafficking

[Yvette Cooper]

are already pitifully low; and a former chief constable has warned that the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 will make that worse. Time and again, the Government have failed to tackle the criminal gangs driving the problem, and to make them pay the price. Instead of pursuing this unworkable, unethical, extortionately expensive and deeply damaging policy, the Government should use the money that they are investing in it to go after the gangs that are putting lives at risk. All that they are doing, time and again, is chasing headlines, which is a damaging distraction from the serious hard work that is needed to tackle the gangs and sort out the asylum system.

The Home Secretary has said that the Conservatives are in the last chance saloon. Their policies put them there, and have let the country down. They are always ramping up the rhetoric, and never doing the serious, hard work, or using common sense. Britain deserves better than this. Britain is better than this.

Suella Braverman: I am very disappointed by the response from the shadow Home Secretary, and I am concerned that she is seeking to go against a legitimate, rigorous decision set out exhaustively by our independent judiciary, and is still suggesting that this is an illegitimate scheme. We see in the judgment that the scheme is lawful on several grounds. The judgment looked at the legislative authority for the scheme. It looked very closely at the claims that it breached articles 3 and 14 of the European convention on human rights, and article 31 of the refugee convention. It looked closely at whether it was fair, and at whether the right of access to justice was respected. It looked very closely at other public law grounds. On all those claims, the Home Office won. The Court concluded that it was and is lawful for the Government to make arrangements to relocate asylum seekers to Rwanda, and for asylum claims to be determined in Rwanda, rather than in the UK. The judgment is a comprehensive analysis of the reasons why.

The right hon. Lady asks about the eight individual cases. We accept the Court's judgment on those cases. We have already taken steps to strengthen the caseworking process, including revising the information and guidance given to individuals during their assessment for relocation, but we have been clear throughout that no one will be relocated if that is unsafe for them, and support is offered to individuals throughout the process to ensure that it is fair and robust.

The simple truth is that Labour Members have opposed every one of our efforts to deter illegal migration. They opposed the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, life sentences for people smugglers, and the removal of foreign national offenders, including drug dealers and rapists. All they offer is obstruction, criticism, the performative politics of opposition, and magical thinking. What do they actually offer? They say that we should return to the failed Dublin scheme—no matter that it was ineffective, and no matter that the EU does not want it. Labour Members want safe and legal routes as the answer, no matter that this Government have done more than any other in recent history, offering sanctuary to more than 450,000 people by safe and legal routes. No matter that Labour Members cannot define what routes they would stand up themselves, or that our

capacity is not unlimited, and that there are more than 100 million people displaced globally. Would Labour give them all a safe and legal route to the UK?

We cannot indulge in fictions. A fundamental reason why Labour Members cannot articulate a plan is that they cannot be honest with the British public about what they really want. The shadow Home Secretary could not even decide whether she would repeal illegal entry, even though she voted against it. Labour's solution would be to turn our crisis of illegal migration into a crisis of legal migration, with open borders by the back door. Unlimited safe and legal routes are simply open borders masquerading as humanitarianism. Last week the Prime Minister and I announced our plan to tackle small boats. Today the Court affirmed the legality of a central piece of that plan, and tomorrow Labour still will not have a plan.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Although the High Court ruled that the Rwanda policy is lawful, as has been said there were only eight asylum claimants. Those cases have all been set aside by the Court, which said in its ruling that the circumstances of each claimant had not been considered properly. Latest Home Office website figures currently show that more than 160,000 individual cases are outstanding. Furthermore, as the Home Secretary—in whom I have the greatest confidence—stated, the European Court judge who issued the injunction clearly did so without proper consideration of the Rwanda policy, and such rulings do not command our respect.

Does my right hon. and learned Friend accept that for all those reasons it becomes more essential than ever to apply the “notwithstanding” formula to the new legislation that the Prime Minister has announced for mid-January? That must also distinguish in our own law between genuine refugees and illegal economic migrants, not only in the interests of saving life, but also to prevent organised criminality, and to assert UK parliamentary sovereignty, overriding the European convention on human rights, and at the same time dealing comprehensively with the current backlog of those 160,000 outstanding asylum cases.

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The European Court of Human Rights did not rule on the lawfulness of our policy. It did not rule that the policy or relocations were unlawful, but it did none the less prohibit the removal of individuals on the 15 June flight, via interim and injunctive relief. We have a proud tradition of defending fundamental rights in this country, and we will always retain a robust approach to protecting and preserving human rights. However, that does not mean that we will have a migration system that can be abused and exploited by those who do not have legitimate claims to be here. As the Prime Minister announced last week, we will be bringing forward legislation to ensure that we have a robust migration system and secure borders.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): This is a dark day indeed with this judgment, particularly when the Home Secretary comes to the House to imply that having morals is fanciful. Enver Solomon of the Refugee Council has called the policy

“wrong in principle and unworkable in practice”,

and I am certain that this will go to appeal as charities and those involved in the issue have stated. SNP Members will never get behind this policy—not in our name—and I remind Members that slavery, apartheid and marital rape were all lawful at one time, but none of them were right.

The Court found that the Home Office had failed to consider properly the circumstances of the eight who challenged the policy. How exactly does the Home Secretary intend to approach such cases now, and what will happen to those eight individuals? What happens to those who have already been issued with notices of intent, and what confidence can they have in a system that previously did not properly consider the cases of eight people?

The Home Secretary claims that this will be a deterrent. The Tories also claimed that the hostile environment would be a deterrent and that the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 would be a deterrent. Now they claim the Rwanda policy will be a deterrent. None of them is working because they fail to recognise the desperate circumstances that drive people to come here in the first place. Safe and legal routes will work and prevent people from losing their lives in the channel.

The Home Secretary talked about the trade in human cargo. We all want to tackle the people smugglers who exploit people in the most vulnerable of circumstances. However, what else is the Rwanda policy but state-sponsored people trafficking? How many people are actually going to be removed to Rwanda? It is going to be a tiny proportion, so any deterrent effect that the Government claim is not going to be proper. What is the total cost of this unworkable scheme? How much money has been spent on it already? How much has gone on the legal case? How much of it would have been better spent dealing with the catastrophic backlog of cases that the Tories have created?

Suella Braverman: I am afraid that the hon. Lady's ideological zeal is blinding and preventing her from taking a rational approach. I am proud of the fact that we have welcomed 450,000 people through safe and legal routes to this country since 2015. I do not think that anyone can claim that we are not forward-leaning on all of this. She and her party need to be honest about their position with the British people: they stand for open borders and uncontrolled migration.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Parliament has legislated, our courts have ruled. We are apparently stopped by a Russian judge, woken from a bar, to issue an injunction. Can this stand?

Suella Braverman: As always, my right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Neither the Prime Minister nor I are deterred from delivering on this policy, which is an essential part of our wider plans to break the business model to stop illegal migration. We have a legitimate basis for it. It has been upheld after being rigorously tested in our courts. We will continue to move quickly to honour the will of the British people.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The Home Secretary says that Britain has a proud tradition of supporting asylum seekers. That is true in part, but it is not true under her tenure. She is pursuing a vile policy,

which is brutal towards the individuals concerned, and continually tells us that it is illegal to seek asylum. It is not; it is clearly there in all international conventions. Will she for once have a sense of humanity towards people who are desperate and victims of wars, environmental change and human rights abuse—and exploited to boot? Cannot she just hold out a hand of friendship and understanding towards these desperate people, rather than the brutal assertion that she is making?

Suella Braverman: The right hon. Gentleman talks regularly about safe and legal routes being a means to an end of illegal arrivals. The reality is that our safe and legal routes have already allowed 450,000 people to come here since 2015, with 300,000 in the last year alone—the highest number that we have seen in several decades. However, that needs to happen in conjunction with deterrent policies if they are to have any effect and if we are to stop the practice of people taking lethal and unlawful journeys across the channel, jumping the queue, undermining the British people's generosity and breaking the law.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): While the judgment is welcome, it will not solve the problem not just because of the relatively few numbers that can be deported to Rwanda but because each case must be fought individually, and human rights lawyers will fight every single case individually. That is the problem. Surely the only serious way in which we can deter migration across the channel is by having the legal right not just to process people when they arrive on our shores but to arrest them and detain them until their asylum application is dealt with. Does anything in the refugee convention stop us doing that? If not, why are we not doing it? If the Human Rights Act stops us doing it, can we not apply for a notwithstanding clause in our new legislation to deal with that problem?

Suella Braverman: This is exactly why the Prime Minister made an announcement last week, and the Immigration Minister and I are working intensively to prepare legislation, which will be introduced next year. It will deliver a scheme along the lines my right hon. Friend describes, whereby if you come here irregularly or illegally—on a small boat, putting yourself and others at risk—you will be detained and swiftly removed to a safe third country or to Rwanda for your asylum claim to be processed.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): In her statement, the Home Secretary confirmed that the permanent secretary at the Home Office had concerns about the cost and that she overruled him. We have spent £140 million so far and not a single individual has been removed. When the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) was Immigration Minister, he said that the average cost of removing people would be £12,000—something that was not based on any fact. If she is so confident about the scheme that she took a decision to overrule the permanent secretary, will she not today publish all the costs of the scheme, so we can all take a view on whether it is a good use of taxpayers' money, or whether it is simply a way of fulfilling one of her weird dreams?

Suella Braverman: The right hon. Gentleman needs to get his facts right because actually the agreement was struck between my predecessor, my right hon. Friend

[*Suella Braverman*]

the Member for Witham, and the Rwandan Government. But I support the work she did and the achievement she struck. The agreement represents a long-term policy. It is expected to last for at least five years, and the costs and payments will depend on the number of people relocated, when that happens and the outcomes of the individual cases. Of course, we have been held up by litigation. Once the litigation process comes to an end, we will move quickly to deliver that and deliver value for money.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I am saddened that following last week's tragic events neither the shadow Home Secretary nor the SNP Front Bench are prepared to say that people should not be getting into these boats in the first place. They should be claiming refuge and asylum in one of the 149 convention countries, many of which they will have gone through. I welcome today's judgment from the High Court. Is it not even better than Rwanda that people stay safe on land in France and do not make the crossings in the first place?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People should not be making this journey, they should not be crossing through other safe countries and they should not be choosing to come to the United Kingdom via those means. The sooner we are able to deliver a policy that reflects that, the better.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The courts have been very clear: it is wrong to have a blanket approach to the treatment of refugees, just as it would be wrong to decide that everybody caught speeding could never drive again. What matters is treating each case on its merits. We have seen already how poorly the Government treat refugee children who are here. The Home Secretary talks about being honest, so let us finally have some honest, straight answers. For the avoidance of doubt, will the Home Secretary confirm whether she intends to deport children, or those who are looking after children and are here as refugees to Rwanda? Yes or no—will children be on those flights, Ministers?

Suella Braverman: We have been very clear that families are not subject to the Rwandan policy, but the broader point is this. The hon. Member's reading of the judgment is different from mine. There has been an extensive and exhaustive analysis of the legal claims brought against the Government, and the Court has been pretty emphatic on the legality of the policy. It concluded that the scheme is compliant with our ECHR and refugee obligations.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Two months ago, I visited the Hope hostel in Kigali. Not only was the accommodation of a high standard, but the Rwandans I spoke to expressed hope that those coming would, in due course, obtain jobs and move out to their own homes, thus allowing more refugees to come and take their place. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that this policy is not just lawful, but humane in that it offers refugees real hope?

Suella Braverman: Absolutely. My right hon. Friend reiterates a point dealt with extensively in the body of the judgment. I refer right hon. and hon. Members to

that judgment, in which there is a complete analysis of the exact support that people will receive when they are in Rwanda, the monitoring that will go on to ensure that their welfare is safeguarded, and the track record that Rwanda has demonstrated in supporting refugees from the region in previous instances.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is frustrating to sit here and listen to the Secretary of State, because none of us is denying that this is a legal ruling, but whether or not it is lawful, this plan is immoral, ineffective and incredibly costly for taxpayers. Does the Secretary of State agree that, instead of wasting taxpayers' money on defending the policy through the courts, the Government should focus on stopping these dangerous crossings and tackling smugglers and trafficking by providing more safe and legal routes and sanctuary for refugees? Rather than dealing with the problem after people arrive here, we must deal with it at source so that they are never put in the position where they make a dangerous crossing over the channel.

Suella Braverman: As the justices made clear at the beginning of their judgment, they are not opining on the politics or the morality of the Rwanda scheme; they are simply opining on the lawfulness. That is why I have huge confidence in the judgment that has been handed down today.

If we are talking about the broader issues, I gently disagree with the hon. Lady, as the House would imagine. I think that what is actually unacceptable is that her party is peddling a mistruth to the British people. It is saying that we can have an unlimited and open borders policy, that we have unlimited capacity and that everybody is welcome. Unfortunately, the reality is that that is not the case. We have to take a pragmatic, measured and compassionate approach to our migration—that is what is sensible and is required by the British people.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Central to solving the crisis of illegal migration is the prevention of further loss of human life in the English channel, so I welcome not only today's judgment, but the commitment that my right hon. and learned Friend made in her statement to delivering the Rwanda partnership
“at scale as soon as possible.”

However, it is clear that there will be continued legal challenges to it, either on an individual basis or on a whole-policy basis, so may I push the Home Secretary further on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash): that the legislation coming in the new year, which I look forward to supporting, really must include a “notwithstanding” clause to ensure that we can prevent the further loss of human life in the channel?

Suella Braverman: What is essential is that we introduce, consider and pass legislation that will be robust and resilient and actually deliver on our stated political objectives. That will require an exhaustive analysis of the legal methods but, simply put, we are in the process, we are in the sausage machine, as they would put it, so it is not a pretty sight, but nothing is off the table.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The Home Secretary said over the weekend that she is considering leaving the European convention on human rights in order to

prevent people from claiming asylum. Is it possible to do that without breaking our commitments in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement?

Suella Braverman: What I think is clear is that there are evident challenges with the way in which international conventions and agreements relating to migration are working in the 21st century. I think there are legitimate questions that, at an international level, all nation states are grappling with; I have seen that at first hand when I have spoken to my counterparts in the Calais group or other international partners. There is an unprecedented scale of illegal migration and there is unprecedented pressure on domestic resources. I think that looking at how we can forge a new set of agreements to work better together is definitely a reasonable approach.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Were more safe and legal routes to be made available, they would quickly be taken up and the trade in small boats would then continue unabated—wouldn't it?

Suella Braverman: Yes.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary assure the House that if someone arrives on the shores at Dover to claim asylum in order to be able to join a child, a spouse or an elderly parent here in the United Kingdom under the right to family life, that individual will not be put on a plane to Rwanda and separated from his or her family for the rest of their lives?

Suella Braverman: Anyone arriving here irregularly will be eligible for consideration. We will consider every case on its individual merits. We have excluded families from the scheme, but we will also ensure that the decisions are made on a lawful and rational basis.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the ruling and the Home Secretary's comments. It is clear from what we are hearing from Opposition Members that there is a great gulf between their views and those of the vast majority of the British people. Overwhelmingly, my constituents will want to see the Home Secretary's and the Prime Minister's proposals implemented as quickly as possible. In particular, there is genuine concern about the speed of the processing of the many cases. Although additional staff are being taken on, the pitiful number of cases with which they are dealing each week needs to be dramatically increased. Can my right hon. and learned Friend assure me that action is being taken to ensure that that happens?

Suella Braverman: Processing asylum claims is one core element of meeting the challenge more broadly. That is why it is right that we are increasing the number of caseworkers, increasing their specialism and streamlining the process. Ultimately, we want to bear down on the number of people waiting for a decision from the Home Office.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Home Secretary says that she is taking a deterrent approach, but it is plain that today's judgment cannot and will not function as a so-called deterrent. The whole point of this vile policy of expelling asylum seekers to Rwanda is that expulsion was supposed to happen automatically and rapidly for anyone without a prior permission to

come here via a refugee scheme. However, today's High Court judgment found that each and every individual case must be assessed first, so there will be nothing automatic about it, and under this Government there will be nothing rapid about it either. Will the Home Secretary therefore put a permanent end to this useless cruelty, provide safe and legal routes, and ensure that such routes actually function? The one from Afghanistan currently does not.

Will the Home Secretary also stop saying that this policy has the support of the British people? According to a recent YouGov poll, just 10% of them support it. The British people are better than this vile British Government.

Suella Braverman: I think the reality is that we are supported in taking control of our borders. That was reflected in both the 2016 referendum and the 2019 general election. We have made it clear that we will do whatever it takes to ensure that we make progress on stopping illegal migration, bring an end to this lethal journey, and, ultimately, restore integrity to our immigration system.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I welcome today's judgment, but I find it deeply frustrating that one isolated judge can delay this process for six or seven months. Will the Home Secretary give me some sense of the timescales following the judgment? When will the first flights take off? That is what we all want to see happening, and my constituents will begin to rest easy when they can see those flights taking off.

We will probably have to strike agreements with other countries. Can the Home Secretary assure me that when we do strike such agreements, they will not be delayed in the way in which this has been delayed, and we will not go through exactly the same motions, which take oh, so long?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is right. We have always maintained that this policy is lawful, and today the court has upheld that. We know that further legal challenges are possible, and we will continue to defend this policy vigorously in the courts. However, once the litigation process has come to an end, we will move swiftly in order to be in a position to operationalise the policy and deliver on our promise.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Can I caution the Home Secretary gently against getting overexcited about a decision at first instance? Often, important constitutional decisions at first instance are overturned on appeal. A recent example was when the last Prime Minister but one unlawfully prorogued Parliament. I think an appeal is inevitable. In the meantime, removals to Rwanda cannot take place because of the interim measures issued by the European Court of Human Rights. Perhaps she would like to explain to some of her Back Benchers the concept of an interim order issued by a judge sitting alone to preserve the status quo, which happens, I believe, in English law regularly by way of injunction.

The Home Secretary seems to be implying that she will obtemper the order of the European Court of Human Rights issued under article 34 of the convention, which the United Kingdom is bound by. I know she is

[Joanna Cherry]

not a great fan of the convention, and a lot of her Back Benchers are asking her about the notwithstanding clause, so is it her intention to domestically legislate her way out of our international treaty obligations?

Suella Braverman: It is not appropriate for me to speculate on the claimants' response or whether there will be any appeals following today's judgment. We welcome today's findings and we will vigorously defend any appeal on the substantive matters of the lawfulness of the policy. We have been clear that, in designing and introducing our legislation next year, we will have to ensure that it is sufficiently robust to promote a scheme to ensure that if people arrive here illegally, they will be detained and swiftly removed to a safe country for your asylum claim to be processed.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents welcome the High Court judgment and want the relocation flights to Rwanda to take off as soon as possible. They will be very concerned to hear that they could be subject to further judicial delay. Could the Home Secretary outline to my constituents how long she anticipates that judicial delay will be? When can I tell my constituents that the flights will take off?

Suella Braverman: The reality of litigation is that there are appeal rights. There is a hearing on 16 January, in which the claimants and the Home Office will make representations on any applications to appeal. The court will decide the next steps, if any, in UK litigation. I am considering the Home Office's position with my legal team, so it would not be appropriate to discuss our strategy in the meantime. There is a hearing on 16 January to consider appeal applications.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The right hon. and learned Lady tries very hard to find a way forward and a solution, which I acknowledge, and I defer to the High Court ruling. I say with great respect to the right hon. and learned Lady that, clearly, we have a duty of care. Along with many others in this House and in the nation, I do not believe that the scheme fulfils our moral obligation. Should other ways of dealing with the situation be identified, such as better regulation of the English channel, better processes in France or more acceptable ways of migration, will it be reconsidered? There has to be a more compassionate approach.

Suella Braverman: The solution involves a multifaceted approach. That is why we are working closely with the French. I was pleased to strike an agreement last month with my French counterpart to bolster co-operation on the channel, and information and intelligence sharing. For the first time ever, UK Border Force officials are working hand in hand with our French counterparts. That is why I have worked closely with other Interior Ministers from European nations on similar issues. That is why we need to work on our asylum backlog and introduce legislation. The Rwanda scheme is one element of a multidimensional programme. We need all elements to work in tandem.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): As the Home Secretary knows, Stoke-on-Trent has already done more than its fair share, and this has put huge

pressure on our local public services, so does she agree that it is really important that we now get on with delivering this policy and get on with those flights as soon as possible?

Suella Braverman: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, his Stoke parliamentary colleagues, the local authorities and all those involved in supporting asylum seekers in Stoke. I know that a high number of people are currently accommodated in his area. It is therefore vital that we stop people coming in the first place, and delivering the Rwanda partnership is key to making that happen.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is the super-rich and those on luxury yachts, not small boats, that people should be scared of. Asylum seekers are people just like us; they have hopes, dreams and aspirations. This policy could be legally sound but it is immoral and a waste of taxpayers' money. This cruel Government should be ashamed of themselves. The Home Secretary said in her statement:

"This judgment thoroughly vindicates the Rwanda partnership...It is what the overwhelming majority of the British people want to happen."

Of course, the Rwanda partnership was not in the Tory manifesto, so can she evidence this support from people across all four nations wanting the Rwanda deal? Scotland certainly does not, and Scotland will continue to reject these xenophobic policies.

Suella Braverman: The reality is that stopping people taking the journey in the first place is the compassionate and pragmatic approach. It delivers for the British people, but it also sends a message to the people smugglers, the human traffickers and those who are deliberately taking the journey to come here for illegitimate means, not to do so. That is the sensible approach.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I welcome the judgment today that confirms that the Government's policy is legal and will be a step forward to implementing what the Prime Minister said last week. The Home Secretary is right to say that we need to break the business model of the people smugglers. Does she agree that it is not enough just to go after the supply, even though those people are immoral and parasitic, and that we also need to destroy the demand for these journeys in the first place? The way we will achieve that is by making it clear that those that come by boat will not be allowed to stay in this country. That is what worked in Australia, and that is what will work here.

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have met Australian officials who were involved in the design of their sovereign borders programme, and they say that once they were able to remove illegal entrants to Papua New Guinea or Nauru, they saw a dramatic change in the numbers of people attempting the journey in the first place. That is the model on which our Rwanda scheme is based.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): If every country took this Government's approach, this Rwanda approach, the countries that already host the overwhelming majority of refugees—the Jordans, the Lebanons, the Pakistans and the Ugandas of this world; the first countries—would

be required to host all of them, while wealthy western countries such as the United Kingdom could pick and choose if and when they wanted to help out. What this Government are arguing for is an end to the international system of refugee protection, is it not?

Suella Braverman: I really disagree with the moral high ground that the hon. Member seems to be taking, in the light of Scotland's paltry record on taking asylum seekers. It has refused to take anybody who has come here on a small boat, and that is unacceptable.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I welcome the statement today and the judgment, but will the Secretary of State confirm to the House that she will continue to use every tool in her power to stop these boats? As we can see, the Opposition and the human rights lawyers will try to stop the good work that the Secretary of State is doing, but the people of Doncaster are tired of been taken advantage of by these illegal immigrants. Will she confirm that she will continue to use every power that she has?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend speaks not only for the people of Doncaster but for the people of Britain in expressing the sentiment that the British people are tired and want this problem to be fixed. It is only this Government who are going to do it.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): How many of the people who were pulled from the channel last week does the Home Secretary think should be sent to Rwanda?

Suella Braverman: The incident last week was tragic. People died. Precious human lives were lost. People had been exploited and took a journey that was unlawful, lethal and, in the end, tragic. That is what we want to bring to an end.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The High Court found that the Home Office has to consider an asylum seeker's particular circumstances before deporting them to Rwanda. Does the Home Secretary acknowledge that this defeats the scheme's original purpose, which was to have applications assessed in Rwanda under Rwandan law? As such, will she reconsider?

Suella Braverman: The judgment is very clear that our arrangement, under which people will be relocated to Rwanda for their asylum claim to be processed and for them to be resettled there, has been found to be lawful. There was an extensive analysis of all the potential legal claims that could render it unlawful, and the Home Office won.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and for responding to questions for more than 50 minutes.

Convention on Biodiversity COP15: Outcomes

5 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will update the House on the outcomes of COP15 on the convention on biodiversity, which was held in Montreal and from which I have just returned.

For too long, nature has been overlooked as the Cinderella of the story, but flora and fauna are important in and of themselves. Nature is both the essential foundation and a powerful engine of our economy, and helping nature to recover is one of the most cost-effective ways of tackling so many challenges, including the causes and impacts of climate change, thirst, hunger and ill health. and of bolstering peace and prosperity.

Early this morning, the world came together to secure the strong, ambitious global framework we need to catalyse a decade of environmental action. The framework is on the scale of the Paris agreement, as required, and puts nature firmly on the map. The agreement includes global targets to protect at least 30% of the world's land and at least 30% of the global ocean by 2030, and to see natural systems restored, species populations recovering and extinctions halted. It includes reporting and review mechanisms that will hold us all to account for making timely progress on bringing our promises to life, and commitments on digital sequence information to make sure communities in nature-rich countries feel the benefit of sharing the solutions that we know their flora and fauna can provide.

Behind the scenes, over many months, we have been working with Ecuador, Gabon and the Maldives to develop the credible 10-point plan for financing biodiversity during this decade that played a critical role in getting the agreement over the line, by giving nature-rich countries confidence in our collective willingness and ability to secure the investment needed to protect the natural wonders on which their people and, in many cases, the whole world depends. On the back of those efforts, public, private and philanthropic donors committed billions of dollars to new investment in nature.

The agreement includes commitments to create a new international fund for nature, to increase investment in nature from all sources to \$30 billion a year by 2030, and to accelerate the vital shifts that are already under way to make sure our economies underpin our survival and our success. I thank our team of Ministers and pay tribute to all our UK civil servants from across Government and our world-leading scientists from a range of British institutions, including Kew Gardens and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

We have been on this journey since the CBD COP14 in Egypt in 2018, which I attended. In meetings with delegations from around the world, time and again, we heard praise for how the UK's world-class negotiators helped to broker this agreement. We know from our experience here in the UK that, when we set ambitious targets, we see an acceleration in action to meet them across Government, sectors and communities, which is why we have worked so hard to secure these global targets.

Just before I set off for Canada, I announced that we have taken the next steps towards leaving the environment in a better state than we found it, by putting a set of new

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

stretching domestic targets into UK law under the Environment Act 2021 on air, water and waste, as well as nature, land and sea, to improve the state of the environment in our country. These targets will be challenging to meet, but they are achievable. The global coalitions of ambition that we have been leading, co-leading and supporting will now shift towards supporting the implementation of the new international nature agreement.

The UK is committed to playing our part now and in the months and years ahead. Although no country can solve this alone, if we work together to make this a decade of action, we not only stand to avoid the worst impacts but, by securing the abundance, diversity and connectivity of life on Earth, we stand to build a better future for every generation to come.

I commend this statement to the House.

5.4 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. The agreement signed in Montreal this morning to protect 30% of the planet for nature and restore 30% of the planet's degraded ecosystems is welcome news. That we are to protect a minimum of 30% of land and 30% of our seas is a benchmark we must adhere to, to avoid ecosystem collapse.

I was glad to be part of the UK's delegation to COP15. The Secretary of State used her spot on the global stage to announce the UK's environmental targets—the ones where she missed her own legally binding deadline in October. I note that the Secretary of State did not announce the delayed targets to the House first in the proper way, and I think that speaks volumes. We are still to have an oral statement on those targets.

It is astonishing then, that after all the warm words, the Government's own targets do not include a 30% goal for protecting nature. The Secretary of State compared nature with Cinderella. If that is the case, the right hon. Members for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) and for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) must be the cruel stepisters who have neglected her during their time in charge.

The Government also failed to include overall measures for water quality and protected sites in their targets. The reality of the Secretary of State's watered-down targets means that our country and our communities will face even more toxic air and more sewage dumping for longer. A cynic's view might be that the Government are happy to commit to non-legally binding targets in Montreal, while shirking any real responsibility at home. Ambitious environmental leadership means, at the very least, ensuring clean air, clean water and access to nature. It does not matter how the Government try to dress it up, their targets do not go anywhere near far enough and it is our communities that will suffer as a result.

Rivers in England are used as open sewers. Not one is in a healthy condition, and only 14% meet good ecological standards. With no overall water quality targets, the Conservatives can continue to allow raw sewage to flow into our natural environment hundreds of thousands of times a year. How does that fit with our Montreal commitments? Only Labour has a proper plan to clean

up our waterways. We will introduce mandatory monitoring with automatic fines, hold water bosses personally accountable for sewage pollution and give regulators the power to properly enforce the rules.

One in five people in the UK live with a respiratory condition, such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, which are worsened by breathing toxic air. We know that is especially dangerous for children and vulnerable adults, and I am extremely concerned by the unambitious targets for air quality set out by the Government. Labour is committed to tackling this health crisis once and for all with a clean air Act, including the right to breathe clean air, monitoring and tough new duties on Ministers to make sure that World Health Organisation clean air guidelines are kept.

Of the 20 UN biodiversity targets agreed to in 2010, the UK has missed 17. When it comes to the environment, the Government constantly make the wrong choices, delay vital action and duck the urgent challenges. Failure to deliver on environmental targets at home show that their promises at COP15 mean very little. The Secretary of State's colleague at COP, Lord Goldsmith, described the UK as one of the "most nature-depleted countries" on the planet. The Environment Act 2021 target on species abundance, which the Government were forced to concede by Opposition amendments, promises only to "halt" the decline in species by 2030. How does that now sit with our Montreal commitments? It is clear from the Secretary of State's watered-down environmental targets that this Conservative Government have given up on governing.

Dr Coffey: I have never heard such rubbish from the Opposition. I am really quite sad about that. For a start, let us just get it clear: it was good that the hon. Member went to Montreal, but he was not a member of the UK Government's delegation. I am glad that he went anyway, as did other Members. At the first opportunity after getting clearance for the targets, I did inform Parliament, and a written ministerial statement was laid in the Lords on Friday before I made a short announcement when I was in Montreal.

I am very clear that this agreement would genuinely not have been as strong had it had not been for the efforts of the UK Government. Even this morning, in the dark hours in Montreal, the text was reopened at our insistence to make sure that the depletion of nature was included in the text of what was agreed. At the same time, we have been working tirelessly, day in, day out, during this negotiation to make sure that we secured finances, because I am conscious that many nature-rich countries around the world need that financial support to make sure that nature is restored.

In terms of what we are planning to do here in the UK, frankly, nature has been depleted ever since the industrial revolution. That has recently been more recognised, and that is why it was this Government who put in place the Environment Act 2021. By the way, that builds on a number of environment Acts that previous Conservative Administrations have put in place, recognising the importance of legislation, but also delivery.

The hon. Gentleman refers to the air quality target. The only reason why we have kept what we consulted on—10 micrograms per cubic metre for PM_{2.5} by 2040—is because the Labour Mayor in London is failing to deliver it. I am absolutely confident that in the rest of

the country it can be delivered by 2030, but that is why we will continue to try to make sure that air quality is a priority for Mayors and councils right around the country.

As for moving forward, almost every statutory instrument has now been laid today. There was a slight delay on one of them, but I expect those SIs to be considered by both Houses of Parliament next month. They will come into law. Meanwhile, we continue to work on our environmental improvement plan and making sure that the environment will be a better place than it was when we inherited it.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Ind): Will the Secretary of State say a few words about the need not only to stop the diminution across the world of biodiversity, but, ultimately, to get to a place where the expansion of nature can once again happen? That is a long way off. But is it not true that UK Government leadership on this issue has just delivered a major landmark step forward and we should all, across this House, be proud of the effort the team has put in, in order to make as much progress as this? In the international arena it is hard to get big agreements, and the Secretary of State has just got one.

Dr Coffey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. We both represent the magnificent county of Suffolk, which is why we are trying to make sure we continue that improvement of nature. I believe he is a champion for dormice and I am a champion for bitterns, and we have seen improvements in the habitats for both animals. On a long-term situation such as the environment, it is crucial that the House comes together to recognise the importance of what has been achieved and give credit, particularly to our civil servants, for that achievement. We also need to recognise the challenges ahead for Governments, local councils and industry, and for individual choices that people make, in what we are trying to do to not only protect, but enhance, restore and improve the environment, which we enjoy.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. Whether it is local schools such as St Paul's Primary School in Shettleston having a focus on biodiversity in the school garden or global summits such as COP15, we all have our part to play. So we on these Benches welcome any progress made at COP15.

Scotland's new biodiversity strategy includes the COP15 target of halting biodiversity loss by 2030 and goes further, with a target of restoring biodiversity by 2045. So will the British Government likewise produce a new biodiversity strategy, one that matches both the COP15 and Scottish targets? Ministers in Holyrood have recognised that the climate and biodiversity crises are inextricably linked, and that one cannot be tackled while the other is ignored. Does the Secretary of State agree with that, and agree that decisions to increase fossil fuel production and use will only accelerate biodiversity loss?

The Scottish Government led the UK in recognising the biodiversity crisis and have now led the UK in establishing a dedicated £65 million nature restoration fund. Will the British Government follow that example and create a dedicated biodiversity restoration fund for England? Finally, concerns have been raised about the sidelining of African states at the very end of the COP15 process, and the overruling of their calls for dedicated funding to support biodiversity efforts. Does the Secretary of State share our deep concern at global south nations

being ignored? Does she agree that those who face the brunt of the climate and biodiversity crises must be heard in global climate negotiations?

Dr Coffey: I thank the hon. Gentleman. The Scottish Minister, Lorna Slater, was out in Montreal as well, and it is really important that the UK works together to improve nature. I give credit to Scotland in that regard.

However, I say to the hon. Gentleman that we already have established funding, with the nature for climate fund, and through the blue planet fund we have already undertaken a number of investments that will improve nature, not only in this country, but around the world. I am particularly thinking of Commonwealth countries, but this also applies to overseas territories and the south, to which he refers. That is why the importance of the £30 billion funding that will go in was discussed back and forth, and the UK was very happy to make sure that it got delivered. We recognise the need to ensure significant investment all around the world and that value is attributed to nature as much as it is to climate, if not even more so. Candidly, we can do as much as we like on tackling climate change, but if we do not preserve and restore nature, it will effectively be for nought. That is why we have put so much work into doing this. It is why, at COP27 in Egypt, our Prime Minister set out the importance of restoring nature, saying that it was critical in terms of tackling climate change. The hon. Gentleman may be aware of our environmental land management scheme. We have started the first phase of the sustainable farming incentive, and we will be announcing more early in the new year as we make the transition from the traditional European funding, which is effectively area-based—on how much land people owned—to farmers being paid for certain goods in order to improve the environment and reduce carbon emissions.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): This issue rightly attracts a lot of attention. In particular, schoolchildren in Moray often speak to me about biodiversity and nature. Indeed, it is one reason why a nature Bill was included in the Scottish Conservative manifesto for the Holyrood elections. The Secretary of State has outlined the collaboration that there was with Scottish Government Ministers out in Canada. Can she state what ongoing discussions there will be with the devolved Administrations to ensure that this crucial issue continues to be raised at the highest level within Governments across the United Kingdom?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that collaboration, which is vital when it comes to recognising the importance not just of nature corridors, but of biosecurity, and it unites Great Britain. There is also the work that we do through Northern Ireland. Importantly, we have regular meetings with all the Governments of the devolved Administrations, and we will continue to do so. Nature is critical because of its self-evident transboundary nature. Whether it is about species abundance or about thinking of ways to reduce pollution, which has impacts on nature, we will continue to work collaboratively right across the United Kingdom.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to the UK's officials for what they have achieved in the negotiations in Montreal, and, indeed, to David Cooper, who, as deputy executive secretary,

[Barry Gardiner]

has worked tirelessly for many, many years. She knows that, despite 28% of England already being designated as protected areas, scarcely 4% is actually being protected. The target of 30% of our planet to be protected by 2030, however desirable, is just that—a target. It is nothing without a programme of implementation for the protective measures to restore those eco-systems and stop the extinction of species. That programme needs interim deliverable goals, yet in the written ministerial statement last week, the earliest interim target, against which the Government's performance can be measured, is 2037. Will she set out clear UK staging points against transparent baselines, and does she accept that the Paulson report on the financing of nature says not that £30 billion is required, but that £711 billion is required?

Dr Coffey: Let me just correct the hon. Gentleman on the last thing that he said. What was published the other day was about the targets, which, according to the Environment Act 2021, have to be for a minimum of 15 years. The interim targets have not yet been published. They will be included in the environmental improvement plan and they are for a minimum of five years. Therefore, to get the record straight, they are two different targets.

On making improvements, I completely understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying. There are a number of situations where we want sites of special scientific interest to be in a better state than they are. That is why we will work through the environmental improvement plan. That is also why we are taking advantage of Brexit freedoms to make sure that we can redesign how the money from the common agricultural policy, which currently supports farmers and landowners, will be repurposed to make sure that public goods are achieved, such as environmental improvement and the tackling of carbon emissions.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will this landmark agreement open the way for larger-scale uptake of solutions such as mangrove and seagrass as a means of capturing carbon and helping to tackle global heating?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend may not know this, but I am mad for mangroves. They are amazing. Unfortunately we cannot grow them in this country, since we are not in the tropics, but we do have salt marsh and we want to see increasing elements of that. I expect to see a substantial amount of the funding from our blue planet fund purposed towards mangroves; I believe we already have projects under way in Madagascar and Indonesia, and we will continue to try to develop those.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): I have also recently returned from the international biodiversity summit, COP15, where I met representatives from the Wampis Nation, indigenous people from Peru. Their fear was palpable. Their neighbours are dying and the world has cast them aside. Can the Secretary of State tell me what the UK Government are doing to prevent their extinction, and whether COP15 was a missed opportunity to protect the rights of indigenous people?

Dr Coffey: Far from it. I appreciate that the agreement was only closed earlier today, but it was a significant win for indigenous people and local communities, which

is why it played such a prominent part in the negotiations. I think the hon. Lady is probably behind the times, but I think it is important we continue to make sure that—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady obviously wants an Adjournment debate, and I am sure she might get one, but that would just give us a further opportunity to say what a magnificent achievement this was for the world and that it is thanks to the UK Government making sure that it delivered, not only for people in the UK, but for indigenous peoples and local communities. We will continue to strive to make nature for the planet a lot better than what we inherited from the last Government.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on this statement and on all her work and leadership on this issue. Protecting ecosystems and halting biodiversity loss is critical to safeguard our planet for future generations. Does she agree that maintaining international leadership and making this issue central to Government policy is the only way to ensure that the changes needed will be delivered?

Dr Coffey: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. That is why it was important that when the Prime Minister went to Sharm el-Sheikh for COP27, building on our COP26 presidency where we included nature as a full day of the climate change conference, he referred specifically to the fact that £3 billion of the £11 billion total climate financing will be dedicated to nature. He recognises how critical it is, and we will continue to endeavour to improve the natural environment not only in this country, but around the world.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The agreement on a framework that commits to halting and reversing biodiversity loss is of course very welcome. However, it is a bit staggering that the Government's own environment targets, smuggled out late last week, will fail to deliver on that goal. They do not even include goals to improve the condition of protected nature sites or overall water quality. As a priority, will the right hon. Lady align the Environment Act 2021 with the new commitments made in Montreal? Specifically, with just 38% of SSSIs and 14% of rivers in good condition, will she now commit to consulting on and setting those crucial targets next year?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady is right to congratulate the world on recognising that and the UK on its role in making sure that nature and restoration were included in the text—and if she did not mention our role, I can assure her that that was the reason it was put back into the text early this morning. The indicators we consulted on set out very clearly that the apex indicator was species abundance. There are a number of other targets that will aim towards that, and by achieving that, I am confident that we will achieve some of the other targets to which she refers, including of course increasing the number of hectares of habitat for nature in this country.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Protecting nature and increasing biodiversity is often led by grassroots organisations. I invite the Secretary of State to commend the work of the Friends of Miss Whalley's Field, led by Paul Wiggins in my constituency, which takes a piece of land between the Freehold and Ridge estate areas of Lancaster and plants trees and wildflowers, involving children from local schools such as Castle View and

Lancaster Christ Church primary schools and Central Lancaster High School. Will she not only commend the work of those volunteers, but reaffirm the Government's commitment that they will not return to fracking?

Dr Coffey: I certainly commend the children and volunteers to whom the hon. Lady refers. Fracking has nothing to do with what I am talking about today. That statement has already been made separately by Energy Ministers.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Addressing biodiversity loss is an essential part of addressing climate change, but as with climate change, we see no sense of urgency or leadership in action from this Government. Does the Secretary of State accept that her Department's failure to set targets for water quality or habitat protections in England undermined talks at COP15? She calls nature the "Cinderella of the story", but Cinderella was never forced by the ugly sisters to swim in sewage. That achievement belongs to this Government.

Dr Coffey: I can say that our beaches are cleaner than we inherited them in 2010 from the Labour Government—that is clear. The hon. Lady must be very proud of the last Labour Government's record of achievement on that. I say to her that this matters not just in our countryside and on our coast, but in our urban environments as well. We already have targets on water quality. In fact, I was discussing today with the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) who is responsible for environmental quality and resilience, the approaches we are going to take to try to improve water quality, particularly by thinking about the chemicals in our water, which are particularly problematic in urban areas. That is something on which we need to work with local councils, as well as with the Environment Agency, to try to get changes so that we clean up the water right around the country. I am sure that the hon. Lady will join us when we need to take appropriate action in her constituency in future.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): An historic deal has been reached today, including a global target to conserve at least 30% of land and inland water at a time when we know that not a single river in the UK is free from pollution. The Government only last week scrapped the indicator on river health, the only measure for water companies and the public to know whether their water is clean. Without that indicator, how will my Bath constituents know in future that their water is clean?

Dr Coffey: I think the hon. Lady is incorrect in her understanding about that. The targets are still in place on our aim to achieve for our rivers a 75% "good" ecological status by 2027. That is what we signed up to when we were part of the European Union, that is still our target today, and that is what we will keep working on. It is important that we continue to try to improve the environment—she will know that, given the difficult things that happened with air quality in her city—and we will continue to try to make sure that we take that right across the country.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State and others in the House in welcoming this important agreement, but it only means something if countries do what they have signed up to do. Can she tell us when she intends to bring forward any proposals that may be required to ensure that we in the UK match the very ambitious targets that have just been agreed in Montreal?

Dr Coffey: Through the Environment Act 2021, some targets on improving the environment are already in primary legislation. We have just confirmed pretty much the environmental targets that we consulted on earlier in the year. I believe the statutory instruments are being laid today, and I think one is being laid tomorrow, so that Parliament can vote on those legally binding targets. Meanwhile, we continue to make other improvements, including through the clean air strategy, the biosecurity plan, existing plans for increasing biodiversity, and landscape recoveries.

We are already doing a lot of work. Indeed, we are changing our funding away from the basic payment system and what the European Union did—making payments to improve the environment based on the amount of land somebody owned—to paying for services, so that we can do more spatial targeting in a more intelligent way by improving water quality and reducing pollution. We will take that forward in aspects of the environmental improvement plan, which will be published next month, as well as in the changes that we will make through the environmental land management scheme.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, may I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, which is really encouraging news? I think we are all excited by what she said. As somebody who has been involved in prior biodiversity drives and has planted some 350,000 trees on my land, I know that other landowners will get involved if the incentive is there. I am inspired by the aims, but will the Secretary of State outline how she believes that the UK as a whole can achieve them, how the devolved nations will play into them, and how we in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can all win?

Dr Coffey: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I know that the people of Northern Ireland are also keen to see enhanced nature. I recall my trip earlier this year when I went to the Giant's Causeway for the first time ever and saw beauty in nature but also the force of nature and a desire to continue to improve it. As for how we work together, it will be up to individual devolved Administrations, but I know that Northern Ireland Ministers and the Executive have been very supportive of our approaches so far.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): What impact is the UK's decision to cut the aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income having on the UK's ability to contribute to the 10-point plan for financing biodiversity?

Dr Coffey: We have actually increased the amount of official development assistance going to environmental and climate change projects. I am excited about that. We will continue to see more money coming in from around the world, including from the private sector and philanthropic donors, to help achieve these ambitious aims. I am excited about the future decade.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for responding to questions for over half an hour.

Alcohol Duty

5.30 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the alcohol tax system.

When in the autumn 2021 Budget the then Chancellor—now Prime Minister—announced the biggest reforms to alcohol duty in 140 years, he did so in order to change an outdated and impractical system. Following our country's departure from the EU, our changes will overhaul the UK's obsolete rules, which our membership of the EU precluded us from doing. With these new freedoms, we will embark on radically simplifying the entire system and slashing red tape.

The new alcohol tax system will adopt a common-sense approach whereby the higher a drink's strength, the higher the duty, while new reliefs will be made available to help pubs and small producers to thrive. In doing so, we have made a system that fits with our national priorities, encourages growth and innovation, aligns with public health goals and is fairer for hard-working producers. The aim that lies at the root of this reform is to make the system fairer, simpler to use and more supportive of business.

Notwithstanding those ambitions, we fully understand that businesses face difficulty and uncertainty in the face of rising energy bills and inflation. I have listened to and value stakeholders from across the sector, and I understand that they want certainty and need reassurance in these challenging times. That is why today I can confirm that the freeze on alcohol duty rates has been extended by six months, to 1 August 2023.

Although new duty rates typically come in on 1 February each year, I can confirm that the Chancellor will instead make his decision on future duty rates at the spring Budget 2023, to give businesses certainty and time to prepare. To further support the industry, we are going further by confirming that if changes to duty are announced then, they will not take effect until 1 August 2023. This is to align with the date that historic reforms of the alcohol duty system come into force, and amounts to an effective six-month extension to the current duty freeze. Most importantly, to minimise the burden on business, it avoids the sector having to deal with multiple changes to duty rather than one.

As I mentioned a moment ago, the alcohol duty reforms will help create a simpler, fairer and healthier duty system. A higher rate for sparkling wines will come to an end, meaning that they will pay the same rate as still wine. Liqueurs will be put on the same footing as fortified wine, meaning that a sherry will now pay the same duty as a spirit liqueur, and the duty rate on super-strength white cider will increase in order to address public health concerns.

New draught relief will be worth £100 million a year, and to ensure that smaller craft producers can benefit, the threshold for qualifying containers will be 20 litres. The wine industry will also be supported as it adapts to the new system. Duty on all wine between 11.5% and 14.5% alcohol by volume will have its duty calculated as if it were 12.5% ABV. This will last for 18 months from the implementation of the new system.

Pubs, cider makers, brewers, distilleries and wine makers have an historic place at the heart of our communities. They provide not only thousands of jobs, but hubs that enrich and often define the social fabric of our villages, towns and cities. By saying to the industry that it will face just one single industry-wide change next summer, rather than two over the course of the year, we are giving it maximum certainty. Hospitality is a major part of our economy, and while these remain challenging times, we are doing everything we can to support individual hospitality businesses of every size so that they can have a prosperous new year. I commend this statement to the House.

5.34 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. The Government have confirmed that they are freezing alcohol duty rates for six months. I know that the sector will welcome the announcement, especially given the difficulties that businesses are facing, whether they are producers, suppliers or hospitality venues. I must say, however, that it is absolutely laughable that the Government have announced the change in the name of certainty. We should call it what it is: a U-turn. The previous Chancellor announced a freeze, the current Chancellor scrapped it, and now it is back on.

How did we get here? In October 2020 the Government announced a call for evidence to seek views on how the alcohol duty system could be reformed. At the time, they said that they would make the system

“simpler, more economically rational and less administratively burdensome on businesses and HMRC.”

What we have seen since then, however, is indecision, U-turns and delays.

The Government finally published a response to the alcohol duty consultation in September this year. Then in the shambolic mini-Budget that crashed the British economy, the then Chancellor announced a freeze on alcohol duty that was due to come into force in February 2023. The new Chancellor scrapped the planned freeze, however, in October's autumn statement—just a couple of months ago. We now have a screeching U-turn; the freeze is back in place.

We see again that the Government have no long-term plan for the British economy. They cannot provide the certainty that businesses and their hard-working employees need to plan for the tough winter ahead. They have left businesses and consumers out in the cold. They may not want to hear it, but that is the reality. They are unsure what regulatory systems will be in place in as little as two months.

Today, Labour found that more than 70,000 venues have had to reduce their opening hours due to the price of energy bills, which means that almost a third of pubs, bars and hotels are missing out on customers at the busiest and most profitable time of the year. Those businesses and producers of wine, beer, cider and spirits enrich our communities and boost our high streets. I recently popped into the Standard, a pub in my Erith and Thamesmead constituency, which is really struggling with soaring energy bills and the lack of Government support. It needs the Government to be on its side. The Government promised to tell the House what the new energy bills support scheme would look like before

Christmas, but we have yet to hear anything from them. Only Labour has set out a long-term plan to get our economy growing again.

Looking to the future, we agree with the principles behind the alcohol duty review and we want the alcohol duty system to be made simpler and more consistent. We recognise that there is a balance to be struck between supporting businesses and consumers and protecting public health, and maintaining a source of revenue for the Exchequer, but this statement leaves many questions unanswered.

Can the Minister give an indication of his plans for duty reforms in the coming spring? Can he confirm whether the alcohol duty reform package will be implemented in full? If so, what impact assessment has been carried out on the impact of the transition to the new duty regime? I hope that he can provide some clarity. The alcohol sector and the businesses and jobs that it supports have suffered enough uncertainty and U-turns. These are major changes that will affect businesses and consumers in all our constituencies, so I hope that they will be properly thought through and that we will not see last-minute policy announcements and changes, as we have today.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. To be clear, this is good news for every single part of our alcohol industry and for those who drink in our pubs. Crucially, it gives certainty to the industry. The hospitality industry employed 2.1 million people at the latest reckoning, so it is a huge part of our economy and we want to do what we can to support it.

The hon. Lady mentioned a U-turn. To be clear, we said that we would introduce a radical reform of alcohol duty, and we will introduce that reform. It will come into effect next August. That reform could not have happened if we had not left the European Union. It will introduce, for the very first time, differential duty rates on tap and in the supermarkets. The public want that, because they value their pubs and understand the importance of pubs to their communities. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady intervenes, having sat down. She talked about her local pub. Obviously, we want to assist her local pub, and all pubs up and down the country; that is why we have put in place an energy bill relief scheme worth £18.1 billion, which is a huge intervention.

The energy bill relief scheme is very generous, but it is expensive, and we need to ensure longer-term affordability and value for money for the taxpayer. That is why we are carrying out a review of the scheme, with the aim of reducing the public finances' exposure to volatile international energy prices from April 2023. We will announce the outcome of the review in the new year to ensure that businesses have sufficient certainty about future support before the scheme ends in March 2023. We should remember that this energy-related support comes on the back of the enormous support that we put in place during the pandemic. There were grants, bounce back loans, and of course furlough for all staff working in the hospitality sector.

We are proceeding with this ambitious reform package next year. We felt that it was appropriate to give the sector certainty as soon as possible that it would face only one uprating. That is the right thing to do, and it shows that the Government are supporting the hospitality industry.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Like the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), who speaks for the Opposition, I support what has been announced today. I declare an interest: I drink most things, except super-strength draught cider.

On wine, using an average rate of 12.5% is right; stepped rates would not have worked, because growers do not know what strength a wine will be—the strength fluctuates naturally. A revenue-neutral level makes sense. I hope that this approach will continue beyond the 18 months.

I hope that the Minister will consider whether farm-gate concessions can be made for the growing number of vineyards in this country. I hope that between now and the Budget the Chancellor will calculate the price and tax elasticity, because often, when duty rates are frozen, revenue goes up. There have been times when the rate has gone up and the revenue has gone down, which is perverse.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the Father of the House for his question—I do not think that I will ever get another that mentions both elasticity and high-strength cider; it was an interesting combination of points. He made a very good point about wine. I have enjoyed engaging with all the main alcohol sectors, mainly in November, in the run-up to the making of this decision. As he knows, we are requiring all wine between 11.5% and 14.5% ABV to be treated as though it were 12.5% ABV for the purpose of calculating the duty rate. That will apply for 18 months, so there is a transition. We have to ask ourselves: if that were made permanent, would it not undermine a regime that is ultimately based on taxation by strength? I understand my hon. Friend's point and will continue to engage with the sector on it.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I welcome the statement. I have long supported an alcohol content duty regime, and I hope that it delivers the fairness that the sector needs. As a gentle aside, may I say that we did not need Brexit to bring in this regime? The UK could have applied for a derogation, but it chose, over decades, not to do that.

I have some technical questions. The previous Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), announced a one-year freeze on alcohol duty in “The Growth Plan 2022”; that was due to cost £545 million in 2023-24. The current Chancellor scrapped that, but anticipates an additional yield of £1.3 billion in 2023-24; that was in the autumn statement 2022. First, how can a one-year freeze cost £500 million, while its cancellation in the same year suddenly generates £1.3 billion of additional yield? Also, we have been told that the freeze is being reintroduced and will last until August. How much will that cost the Exchequer?

The proposals following the post-2021 Budget consultation have been reported as having a modest cost of only £25 million next year—that was in the autumn statement Green Book. But this statement seems to suggest that the cost to the Exchequer of the draught beer relief scheme alone will be £100 million a year. Will the Minister explain what the net cost of this measure will be either to the Exchequer, or to the industry? As things stand, the numbers are not clear and in some cases do not add up.

James Cartlidge: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman supports the principle of the reform package that will come into place next August. I hope Members across the House can do so. The cost obviously depends on what decision is made in the Budget next year. That is a matter for the Chancellor at the time. We know that that will be on 15 March, so there is not too long to wait.

The right hon. Gentleman made the point that it was not necessary to leave the European Union to make these changes. To be clear, EU law does not allow member states to differentiate beverages on qualitative characteristics such as whether the product is on draught. EU law actively discourages any attempt to support the on-trade through the duty system. That is also true for a system based on ABV; by and large, that would have been very difficult as well. The fact is that this is a radical reform and it has been made possible by Brexit.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary beer group, and someone who enjoys much of what we have been discussing. May I at least warmly welcome my hon. Friend's statement? This will provide significant certainty to an industry that has experienced significant challenges over recent times, from the impact of weather on crops, to the impact on energy prices on the back of the fallout from covid. So this is a much needed platform on which the industry can build a strong future. It is looking forward with enthusiasm to the differential draught beer duty. That is an important principle. Come the Budget in March, will the Minister consider going much further than the 5% that has already been promised? The principle, and the Brexit dividend, can bring significant benefits to our pubs and beer industry across the country.

James Cartlidge: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments. He has become the chairman of the all-party beer group, but we should remember the work of the former chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood). He cannot speak as he is a Whip, but he put in place all those sessions lobbying MPs and Ministers and making the case for beer. Much as we enjoy that, it is a major employer in this country. My right hon. Friend makes an important point about differential duty. To put that in context, the 5% cut to cider duty will be the biggest cut to cider duty since 1923, so it is significant. Of course I cannot from the Dispatch Box make decisions for the Budget next year, but it is not too far away and I am sure there will be plenty of chances for colleagues to engage up to then.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Stockport has several wonderful producers, including Robinsons Brewery and Stockport Gin, and they have been through a lot over the past few years. When will the Government finally end the U-turns and delays, and agree a long-term solution and support package for the alcohol sector?

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning the producers in his constituency: Robinsons Brewery and Stockport Gin. I am grateful to them for all they are doing in these challenging times to provide employment in his constituency and support consumers with the products they offer. That is what this is all about—supporting those companies and vital sectors in our constituencies. The hon. Gentleman asks about a long-term commitment. This is the biggest reform to

alcohol duty for 140 years. It is a significant reform, getting the balance between competitive rates of duty and consideration of public health, which is incredibly important. It is an opportunity we should all seize and welcome.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I warmly welcome the proposals announced by the Minister today in one of his most impressive performances at the Dispatch Box, and in particular the differential duty rates to allow pubs and restaurants to charge their customers a lower rate of duty than the off-trade, for which many of us have called for a long time. I also congratulate him on the point made by the Father of the House—differential rates on wines will be consolidated to a single rate for the vast majority of wines—because that reaches the principle of simplicity, which was an essential part of the consultation. What is the 18-month period dependent on? If we were to move then to differential bands per percentage of ABV, that would not really help the trade to prepare. The trade needs to know where it is going.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his kind words. My first ever Parliamentary Private Secretary job was as a PPS to him, as a brilliant Health Minister. He mentioned simplicity: he is absolutely right that that is a key part of the reform package. In terms of the wine easement, as we call it, the 18 months is there precisely to enable the sector to adapt to the changes that are coming. He was also right to emphasise the on and off-trade differences. There is a key point on those differences. It is again about public health. The evidence shows that, while all drinking should be done responsibly, where people are socialising and going to the pub, they are less likely to encounter the more severe end of problem drinking; that is more likely to happen in private. That is one of the reasons why we have the differential.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The Scotch Whisky Association said on behalf of producers that it was furious about the Government's decision to increase rates of duty in the autumn statement. The freeze is therefore welcome, but distilling is an energy-intensive business. The Minister said that the energy bills report will come in the new year, but the Chancellor assured me at the Dispatch Box during the autumn statement that it would come before Christmas. I would be grateful if he could explain the delay.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Lady makes an important point. We are aware of the importance of energy costs. I was absolutely clear just now that we will report in the new year. It has taken slightly longer than expected. These are complex matters. It is complex enough to put in place household support. Non-domestic support is particularly complicated because of the huge range of businesses involved. However, let us be clear what is happening: six months of support since October, worth £18.1 billion for businesses, including pubs, distillers and breweries, with their energy bills. That is huge. Of course, I know that people want to know what happens next and in the new year we will come forward with the results of our review.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is encouraging to hear support from across the House for these duty reforms, which were originally announced as a manifesto

commitment at Roseisle distillery in my constituency. Of course, Moray is home to more Scotch whisky distilleries than any other constituency in the House. *[Interruption.]* As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) says, many are very good ones. I have been pressing both the Chancellor and the Prime Minister to maintain the freeze on duty for Scotch whisky for as long as possible, which is important for the entire industry and the jobs that rely on it. Will the Exchequer Secretary take on board what the Father of the House said? When it comes to the Budget in March, will the Government listen to the industry, which has time after time proven wrong Treasury officials who predicted that an increase in duty would increase revenue to the Treasury? In fact, a freeze in duty increases revenue to the Treasury and it would be welcome to see that continuing.

James Cartlidge: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend, who speaks with great knowledge on these matters. He has been a consistent champion for the Scotch whisky industry, standing up for it in this place, whether on tariffs or duties. I know that he was lobbying the Chancellor and the Prime Minister to continue the freeze, so I hope that he is pleased with the result. On what happens going forward, I will engage with the Scotch whisky industry and indeed all the other alcohol sectors. The clear point is that the extension of the freeze is good news for every single sector and I hope that colleagues welcome that.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am not sure whether I should declare an interest, but I do enjoy a tittle—a glass of beer—on occasions. I thank the Minister for his statement. May I seek clarification in relation to his comments on differential rates of duty? He mentioned the need for certainty and the need to encourage diversity in choice in the small brewery sector. He referred to the new draught relief, worth £100 million a year, to ensure that smaller craft brewers can benefit, and he mentioned that the threshold for qualifying containers will be 20 litres. Can he go further and say something about the duty taper? Are the Government going to address the cliff edge above 5,000 hectolitres for small producers?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. To clarify, the draught relief is the new differential duty between the rate applied to alcohol purchased on draught—in other words, in the pub—as opposed to, for example, in the supermarket. This is about creating a level playing field. Small brewers relief is becoming small producers relief, so it extends to cider makers, for example.

As a general point, I have a chart here—you will be pleased to know, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I will not get it out—showing the old rates and the new rates that will come in under the reform, and it is striking how much leaner the new system is. I am more than happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with details of the taper and the technical points. I think he will observe that this is a much simpler system.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome the extension of the duty freeze and am particularly pleased to see the draught relief to support the important on-trade. Can my hon. Friend comment or write to me about the proposals for mergers and

[Andrew Jones]

acquisitions to absorb production over three years rather than one? Basically, allowing that to happen would facilitate a smoother business transition and smoother ownership in the sector.

James Cartlidge: Of course, my hon. Friend was an Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, and I should put on record that he did much of the work that led to us being able to deliver these reforms in the first place. On his question about mergers and acquisitions, I am more than happy to meet him and share with him further detail from officials about the matter.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): I speak as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on alcohol harm. I thank the Minister for recently meeting me and alcohol harm charities. I welcome the introduction of duty in regard to the strength of drinks, but my view is that it still does not go quite far enough, although I appreciate the differential duty. What assurances can he give me, alcohol harm charities and all those concerned about alcohol harm that he will continue to work cross-party and cross-Department to ensure that public health is fundamental in any alcohol duty changes?

James Cartlidge: I enjoyed meeting the hon. Gentleman, other parliamentarians and alcohol harm stakeholders on, I think, 24 November in the Treasury. It was a good meeting, where I think there was acceptance that we are trying with the reform package to strike that balance. We want to have competitive duty rates and to look at levelling the playing field that exists between pubs and supermarkets, but, equally, alcohol harm and consideration of public health must be at the heart of this. That is why the reform package in August has one underlying principle: taxation on the basis of ABV. We think that that is the right way forward, balancing both those approaches.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the statement. It is good news not simply because the hospitality industry is on its knees, but because the

steep increases in prices have led to more people having not a social drink with friends but a sustained drinking at home mentality, which can be detrimental to families. Has the Minister considered taxation aimed at multibuys in supermarkets, in co-ordination with the welcome freeze for pubs and hospitality?

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. As I said last time he asked me a question, the occupant of the Chair always seems to save the best till last. The hon. Gentleman hit the nail on the head. Let us be clear. He is talking about friends who cannot go for a drink because of economic pressures. With the enormous surge in energy costs and the rise in inflation, the biggest impact economically is on consumption and therefore discretionary spend such as in pubs, hitting hospitality. When we talk about the support that matters, it is not just help for businesses with their energy bills but the help that we are giving to consumers, so that they can still find that expenditure to support our pubs this winter. Of course, we are helping them by freezing duty for six more months. It is a win-win for consumers and for the sector.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for his statement and for responding to questions for just under half an hour.

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Ordered,

That, for the period up to and including 31 January 2023,

(1) in the absence of Dame Eleanor Laing, the functions reserved to the Chairman of Ways and Means by Standing Orders or the practice of the House shall be exercised by Dame Rosie Winterton, or, if she is unable to perform them, Mr Nigel Evans; and

(2) Sir Roger Gale shall act as Deputy Speaker and shall exercise all the powers vested in the Chairman of Ways and Means as Deputy Speaker.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

Seafarers' Wages Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

5.59 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Britain's maritime industry is respected around the world for its professionalism and high standards. From shipping safety and financial services to seafarer training and welfare, our flag is acknowledged globally as a symbol of excellence, but maintaining that position in a competitive market requires constant progress. In particular, we must continue to invest in people, the men and women who are our maritime industry's greatest resource, and on whom we rely to uphold Britain's proud maritime tradition. When that hard-earned reputation for quality and expertise was threatened by unscrupulous employers, as it was earlier this year when P&O Ferries shamefully sacked almost 800 seafarers and staff to replace them with cheaper agency labour, we did not hesitate to take action. That is why, following the sackings in spring, the then Transport Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), set out a nine-point plan to prevent other companies from benefiting further from such underhand and unacceptable moves.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): There is nothing in the Bill currently on changing sections 193 and 194 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 to prevent anyone doing what P&O did earlier this year. Is that something the Government are considering?

Mr Harper: The solution we have decided to set out is to ensure that, for operations taking place with a close connection to the United Kingdom, operators have to pay an equivalent to the national minimum wage, so that what they cannot do is replace their staff for cheaper agency labour. That is our judgment on how we think the situation can best be prevented in the future. I accept that other people will propose different solutions, but this is the one we have settled on, and we think it will deal with the issue highlighted earlier this year.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It is undeniable that P&O has acted appallingly, but I do not understand why there is a need for this proposed legislation. The maritime labour convention came into force on 7 August 2014. That international convention, which we signed up to, applies to vessels engaging in trade, or where a vessel is operating under the flag of a country that has ratified the MLC, or is operating in the waters of a country that is ratifying the MLC. Surely that legislation from the International Labour Organisation takes precedence for all vessels across the world?

Mr Harper: Clearly, given what happened earlier this year, we do not think the existing position is satisfactory. That is why we are bringing forward the Bill. If my hon. Friend wants to set out his argument in more detail during the debate, we will obviously listen with great care, but we think legislation is necessary. The Bill is a major step forward and it will deliver on point one of the nine-point plan, changing the law so that seafarers with close ties to the UK working on frequent services to UK ports are paid at least an equivalent to the UK national minimum wage while they are in our waters.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The concern I have, and I believe other Members in the Chamber have, is that I understand the chief executive officer of P&O said that the average hourly wage for his new crewing model would be £5.50 per hour, yet the minimum wage is much more than that even for under-18s. Can the Secretary of State provide clarification? I want the Bill to be firm, hard and strong—I think we all do—so will he address that issue?

Mr Harper: The legislation will ensure that seafarers with close ties to the UK who are working on frequent services to UK ports have to be paid at least an equivalent to the UK national minimum wage while they are in our waters. As the hon. Gentleman points out, for those aged 23 and over, the current rate is £9.50 an hour. From April 2023, it will be £10.42 an hour. That is clearly significantly higher than the amount the hon. Gentleman just set out. That is the point of the Bill: to discourage the sort of behaviour we saw from P&O earlier this year.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Just to amplify the point from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the chief exec of P&O gave evidence to the Transport Committee indicating that it was common practice to pay below minimum wage level. On the Dover-Calais route, P&O staff used to work—this is the UK-based ratings—one week off, one week on rotas. It is not just about wages. Currently, agency staff, including Indian able seafarers, are working at least 12 hours a day, seven days a week, for up to 17 weeks with no shore leave. That must be a risk to health and safety. Does the Secretary of State remember the Herald of Free Enterprise and the impact of stress and tiredness? Surely, it is about more than just wages?

Mr Harper: It is about more than just wages. That was one of the things covered in the nine-point plan, but we are working on other things, including various seafarers' protections and measures with our international partners. This specific Bill is to deal with the specific issue of what seafarers are paid. The hon. Gentleman is quite right that the issue is wider than that, but the Bill deals with what they are paid. It is focused on that, and I hope it gets the support of the House.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State explain to the House clearly why, in the Bill's original draft, frequent visits to UK ports was defined as 52 times a year and now it is 120 times a year? That surely makes it far easier for unscrupulous companies to drive through loopholes here and evade paying people the national minimum wage?

Mr Harper: We think the definition in the Bill at the moment will capture the vast majority of the services we wish to capture. We think that defining that in the way that we have makes it more difficult for people to avoid than it would be if we were very specific about types of vessels, for example. I am conscious that a number of people wish to speak in this debate, so I will make a bit of progress before taking any further interventions.

We said from the start that where new laws were needed, we would create them, that where legal loopholes—which the hon. Gentleman referred to—were cynically exploited, we would close them, and that we would

[Mr Harper]

strengthen employment rights. That is why the Bill is important. Operators of regular services to the UK will be required to pay their crew a decent wage if they want to access our ports, and it will remove the incentive for other, unprincipled firms to drag down pay for seafarers with close ties to the UK.

Under the existing national minimum wage legislation, not all seafarers who regularly call at UK ports are currently entitled to the UK national minimum wage. It cannot be right that seafarers who frequently work in the UK and in our territorial waters are not entitled to the same as other workers simply because they work on an international, rather than a domestic, service. The Bill will fix that particular issue. I recognise that there are other issues that people wish to deal with, but the Bill deals with that. It does not amend the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, but it makes provision for seafarers on services in scope of the Bill to be paid at least a rate equivalent to the national minimum wage.

Since March, we have consulted extensively with the industry to make sure the measures we are discussing are workable. Those discussions have been productive and are continuing. As was just alluded to, the legislation will apply to international passenger or freight services that call at UK ports on at least 120 occasions in a year, which equates to 72 hours on average. Harbour authorities will be empowered to request declarations from operators of services to confirm that they pay their seafarers no less a rate than that equivalent to the national minimum wage. If they do not provide that declaration when requested, harbour authorities will have the power to impose a surcharge, or may be directed by the Secretary of State to do so. It will not be a profit-making exercise for harbour authorities. They may only use the money raised from the surcharge for the discharge of their functions or for provision of shore-based seafarer welfare facilities.

We hope the surcharge is never required. The point of it is to be a disincentive to operators paying low wages. It will be set at such a rate that it does not make financial sense for operators to underpay staff. If they do not pay the surcharge when it is levied, harbour authorities will be empowered to deny access to the port. That will not be an onerous responsibility for harbour authorities; beyond accepting the declarations, they will not be responsible for checking the details of seafarers' pay. The enforcement role will be carried out by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, which will undertake inspections and investigations and, if necessary, prosecute offending operators.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I am curious about denying access to ports. What consideration has the Secretary of State given to granting powers to detain a ship in port? Denying an operator access to a port may simply mean that it moves to a different port of the United Kingdom; detaining a ship would mean much greater risk for the operator, which will surely mean greater compliance.

Mr Harper: We judge that the risk of operators moving to or operating out of a different port is relatively small. The routes on which they operate are the profitable ones, so ceasing to operate on them would not make

business sense. We think that denying access to a port is a proportionate response to the problem, so we have settled on that measure as the appropriate solution.

We will draw up regulations and guidance setting out further details of how the legislation will work. They will be subject to consultation to ensure that our measures are practical and effective and that people cannot avoid them. Feedback from the industry has been crucial throughout the process. Ferry operators told us that inclusions or exclusions based on type of service would create market distortion and ambiguity, so the only specific exclusion in the Bill is for

“a service that is for the purpose of leisure or recreation, or...a service provided by a fishing vessel.”

Jim Shannon: I thank the Secretary of State for his graciousness in giving way. Will resources be made available for the extra work that harbour authorities and marine services will have to carry out? If they are already rushed and under pressure, surely it makes sense to employ more people and make more resources available.

Mr Harper: We do not think that the responsibility on harbour authorities will be particularly onerous. Their job will be to receive declarations, not to investigate or do compliance work; those responsibilities will fall to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. As with all our agencies, it will be a question of setting priorities. As the hon. Gentleman can see from the fact that we are introducing primary legislation on the matter, improving services for seafarers is indeed one of our priorities.

Grahame Morris *rose*—

Mr Harper: I will take another intervention from the hon. Gentleman, as he is a member of the Select Committee on Transport, and then move on.

Grahame Morris: The Secretary of State is being generous in giving way. On the point about harbour authorities being charged with collecting the surcharge, is there a conceivable conflict of interest where a shipping company owns a port or has an interest in a harbour authority?

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point that illustrates why I will have legal powers to enforce whether a port levies the surcharge: to deal with any issues where there is a conflict. He makes a perfectly fair point, and we have thought about how to deal with it.

Our analysis shows that the arrangement that we have set out will capture the vast majority of ferries to the UK, but without including services such as deep-sea container services or cruises. Those services will remain out of the Bill's scope, because they do not call at UK ports frequently enough that the seafarers working on board could be said to have sufficiently close ties to the UK.

We will continue to engage with industry throughout the passage of the Bill. We intend to consult on regulations and supporting guidance, which will include setting the framework within which harbour authorities will set their tariffs for surcharges and the method of calculating the national minimum wage equivalent rate.

It is important to remember that the Bill is just one part of a wider plan to protect seafarers' welfare. It will not solve all the issues brought to light by P&O Ferries' actions, but it is an important step. That is why we

continue to discuss seafarer protections and welfare with a range of close European partners, including discussions about the creation of minimum wage equivalent corridors to encourage the payment of fair wages on entire routes. To continue to improve the protection of working conditions for seafarers, we are developing the voluntary seafarers' charter.

Luke Pollard: There has been a race to the bottom, with P&O Ferries creating a toxic culture, but not all ferry companies are doing the same. Brittany Ferries operates out of Plymouth; it provides a significant lifeline route between Plymouth, Roscoff and Santander that is vital for our exports of agriculture and fisheries products. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is not about P&O Ferries alone? There are examples of good practice among UK ferry operators; it could well be improved, but it is good practice. The race to the bottom that P&O Ferries started is not one in which all UK and French ferry operators want to participate.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman raises a very good point. The point of the Bill and the nine-point plan is to ensure that ferry operators that want to operate in a responsible way are not forced out of business or forced to drop their standards by unscrupulous operators. He also makes the point that services to Plymouth are incredibly important; speaking as a south-west Member of Parliament myself, I want to make sure that they can continue.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): May I draw attention to the much better behaviour that we have seen from DFDS, which operates out of the port of Dover? On port-to-port agreements, will my right hon. Friend confirm that some of the issues that have been raised—including rosters, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's overview of the intensity of the Dover-Calais route, and matters outside the simple question of wages—can be better addressed within that framework between our two nations?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend has put an enormous amount of work into the matter, following P&O's behaviour. She is focused at all times on solving the issues on behalf of her constituents; I know that her conversations with my predecessors focused on fixing the problem in the long term and on supporting operators that want to raise standards in the sector. I thank her for all her work.

The charter that we are developing, in conjunction with the maritime industry and various social partners, will enhance the core employment protections available to seafarers. As part of that plan, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will introduce a new statutory code of practice to address fire and rehire, which it will publish for consultation in due course. My Department is also taking steps to encourage more ships to operate under our flag and to improve the long-term working conditions of seafarers beyond pay protection, as my hon. Friend has just set out.

The measures in the Bill will help to ensure that employees working on vessels that make regular visits to UK ports can no longer be exploited by unscrupulous operators. Following the mass sacking earlier this year of P&O Ferries staff, some of whom had worked for the company for four decades, we promised to act. The Bill demonstrates that we are doing so. We are sending a message to every operator: if you want to serve UK ports

on a regular basis, and if you want to carry passengers to and from our country, you must meet our high standards. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.18 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): May I wish you, the whole House and the staff of the House a very happy Christmas, Mr Deputy Speaker?

Earlier this year, this House stood completely united against the action taken by P&O Ferries. There was total consensus that that criminal act was a national scandal. Some 800 British workers were sacked with no notice—nearly 800 livelihoods were lost because a rogue company made a calculation that it was cheaper to break the law than abide by it. At the time, I stood side by side with many of the sacked crew in Dover. A married couple who had been employees of P&O Ferries for 14 years spoke to me about the reward for their years of loyal service: summary dismissal via a pre-recorded video message, being marched by private security guards off the ships they lived and worked on, and being treated like criminals. That was the human face of P&O's criminal act. It was the reality of a business model that has been allowed to prevail for far too long on our seas—a business model predicated and dependent on exploitation.

As the Secretary of State knows, Labour supports the provisions in the Bill, but, as we have already heard, it is wholly insufficient. Its test must be whether it will end those exploitative practices that have become commonplace in our maritime sector. Will those responsible for the P&O scandal be brought to justice? Will the Bill stop another P&O scandal? I ask because six months on, this Dubai-owned company, which received millions in taxpayers' money during the pandemic and which tore up the rights of British workers and bragged about it to Parliament, has continued business as usual. It should be a badge of shame for this country that P&O Ferries and DP World did what they did precisely because they thought they could get away with it. They knew they could exploit our weak employment laws. They made the calculation that it would be cheaper and easier to pay off those workers because this Government would not hold them accountable.

Despite all the Government's promises, despite all their outrage, P&O's central calculation was correct, was it not? Earlier this year the then Prime Minister himself said that P&O Ferries would face criminal sanctions. The then Transport Secretary said that it would be placed under criminal investigation. He demanded that the boss, Peter Hebblethwaite, stand down. He even demanded that P&O rename its ships, stating that it was completely wrong for them to sail under names such as Spirit of Britain and Pride of Kent. Six months on, however, that chief executive and those who deliberately broke the law in plain sight have faced no consequences whatsoever, and, as far as I am aware, their ships are still happily sailing under those names.

Workers across the country may well be looking to this Government and asking what exactly is the point of them if they can let P&O get away with all this—because Peter Hebblethwaite has been rewarded with a promotion to another directorship within the company. There has been no criminal prosecution as was promised: the Insolvency Service refused to take forward a prosecution,

[Louise Haigh]

and chose not to consider the public interest test in doing so. There has been no action against any of the directors responsible. Every day that Peter Hebblethwaite remains in charge of P&O Ferries, other employers who wish to undermine the rights of British workers will find comfort. He is unfit to lead a British company, and he should be disqualified as a director.

I will be grateful if the Minister who winds up the debate tells us whether he agrees with that, and why it is that six months on, the Insolvency Service is still considering his case when the evidence could not be clearer. He bragged about it to a parliamentary Select Committee! Will the Minister bring that case to a conclusion, and use his own powers under the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 to finally bring this individual to justice?

The fundamental point, however, is this. If P&O Ferries or any of its low-cost rivals wanted to do all this again, nothing in the Bill or anything else that the Government have put forward would stop them. P&O Ferries decided not to notify either the Secretary of State or the competent authorities of the flag states of Cyprus, Bahamas or Bermuda of its dismissal plans—a legal requirement under sections 193 and 193A of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992—and refused to consult the workforce ahead of their dismissal.

The Secretary of State's predecessor said:

"where new laws are needed, we will create them...where legal loopholes are cynically exploited, we will close them, and...where employment rights are too weak, we will strengthen them."—[*Official Report*, 30 March 2022; Vol. 711, c. 840.]

So why does the Bill contain nothing about notification of flagged vessels, or increased sanctions for those who fail to consult ahead of redundancy? The only way to prevent this from happening again is to hike up the damages that can be paid at tribunals, and/or to slap criminal liability on those who break the law in the same way as Peter Hebblethwaite, who bragged about it. Why have the Government shied away from taking the action that is so clearly needed—and why, six months on, have they still not published even a draft of their promised strengthened code on fire and rehire? It was due for consultation in the summer, but it has still not been published. Even the very little that the Government promised in the wake of this scandal has fallen by the wayside.

Let me now turn to the provisions of this limited Bill. We do, of course, welcome the intention to ensure that operators pay a national minimum wage equivalent to those who have a close working relationship with the UK, but, as we have heard, significant elements of these provisions and their enforcement must be strengthened to prevent avoidance, which we know is rife in this sector. First, the minimum wage provision has an offset allowing employers to deduct costs of providing accommodation. That is clearly ripe for abuse, and must be explicitly ruled out. Then there is the issue of "port hopping". As the Bill stands, operators fall within the scope of the Bill if they call at a single UK port on at least 120 days within a year. In the case of some routes, such as that of the *Pride of Hull*, only slight adjustments to their timetable would allow them to escape paying the minimum wage. That period must be reduced. The initial drafting specified 52 visits a year.

There is also the issue of enforcement. In his nine-point plan, the now Business Secretary pledged to involve His Majesty's Revenue and Customs in ensuring compliance with minimum wage legislation, but the Bill does not include a direct role for HMRC, the only expert in minimum wage compliance; and there is no clearly defined minimum fine for breaching the Bill's provisions.

That brings me to the role of the port operators themselves, which was mentioned in earlier interventions. This is, perhaps, the most troubling aspect of the Bill. Many operators do not just run the ferry services, but operate ports as well. P&O itself operates a port. The Government are potentially asking operators such as P&O to fine themselves. That is utterly perverse, and the Government must think again. I note that the Secretary of State said he would retain powers to decide which ports would enforce fines, but he must set a national tariff for surcharges and designate a Government agency for collecting them.

The P&O scandal was supposed to represent a line in the sand for seafarers' rights. The Secretary of State's predecessor was clear about this, saying that the Government would work with

"unions and operators to agree common levels of seafarer protection on...routes."—[*Official Report*, 30 March 2022; Vol. 711, c. 841.]

Seafarers' exploitation is every bit as much about conditions as it is about pay. Baroness Vere of Norbiton, the Minister in the other place, said that the Government would act on that wider exploitation only

"where it is proven that it is appropriate to do so."

Let me briefly give the House an illustrative example of why that is so important.

An agency worker can be contracted on the Dover-Calais service at the shamefully low rate of £4.75 an hour. As is common in the industry, they could be expected to work up to 91 hours a week, on board, full time, for 17 weeks at a time—not entitled to any pension; not entitled to the minimum wage or any sick pay when outside UK waters. I ask Members to imagine a season of winter storms in the Irish sea or the North Sea, where sleep is almost impossible, and to imagine spending up to 17 weeks on board, responsible for the safety of passengers and that vessel. The industry has already learnt from painful experience about the danger of this kind of exploitation, and of seafarer fatigue. The *Herald of Free Enterprise* disaster 35 years ago claimed the lives of 193 crew and passengers, but the Bill does nothing to address these dangerous and exploitative crewing and rostering practices. That is why we must see a legally binding seafarers' charter on the face of the Bill—one that ends the race to the bottom from which P&O Ferries has benefited; one that smashes the business model dependent on the manipulation of vulnerable workers from around the world.

We are a proud seafaring nation. That tradition has been the envy of the world, but the ongoing exploitation of seafarers is a stain on it. With this Bill, we have the chance to drive out these exploitative practices for good, and ensure that another P&O can never happen. That is why Labour supports it today, but will seek to work with the Government to strengthen it in Committee, and ensure that never again can we allow such exploitation to go unchecked on our seas.

6.28 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a great pleasure to make a short contribution to the debate on this important Bill, as Chair of the Transport Committee. I welcome the Bill, although I appreciate that it is not the full solution to the issues that were uncovered by the disgraceful behaviour of P&O earlier this year. Following that incident, the Transport Committee and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee held a joint evidence session, and produced a number of recommendations. One of those key recommendations was that the omission of seafarers from the extension of the national minimum wage, which happened in 2019-20, should be removed, so that the national minimum wage applies to seafarers on journeys to and from the UK. I am pleased that this Bill delivers on that recommendation, but it is not the whole solution to the problems. I welcome further progress on the nine-point plan that the Secretary of State has outlined today.

I have a number of questions on the practicalities of implementing this Bill, which perhaps the Minister could address in his response. I appreciate that some are quite technical, so if he would prefer to write or address them in the Bill Committee, that would be helpful. The first is to pick up the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord). International maritime law is very complex. I would like to probe to ensure that nothing in the Bill will inadvertently cut across provisions in international legislation. I am not a lawyer—I freely admit that. I have done a quick scan of the relevant law and I do not think that the Bill has unintended consequences, but one of the duties of Parliament is to prevent that. If the Minister could give me some reassurance, that would be welcome.

The second point picks up on what the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) raised on port hopping. Are harbour authorities the best body to enforce breaches of the law? I am reassured by what the Secretary of State said in response to the hon. Gentleman, but I would like to probe a little further. Would the Maritime and Coastguard Agency be a better body to enforce breaches of the provisions of the Bill to prevent the port hopping risk? I do not think it is a serious risk but it is worth exploring further to have a comprehensive settlement.

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning my intervention. The concern of Opposition colleagues is in relation to when the ferry operator has a commercial stake in the harbour authority. I wonder whether there should be an automatic pass-through where there is a commercial link, so that powers automatically go to the Government and there can be no suggestion of any conflict of interest in the regulation of those fines and surcharges?

Iain Stewart: That is a fair question. I was reassured by the Secretary of State's answer that the Government have thought about that. That is why the Secretary of State has the power to intervene when he thinks that the harbour authority has a conflict of interest. I am sure that it will be explored further in Committee. I was satisfied on that point; my concern was with regard to a vessel that might skip around different ports or adjust the timetable, as was mentioned, to get around that. I am not saying that the MCA is the most appropriate body, but I would like to check that.

The third point I want to raise is on the minimum wage corridor that the Secretary of State mentioned. The joint Select Committee session flagged this up. Work is ongoing with a number of European countries to try to establish those, but an update on how those discussions are going would be welcome. This is a good Bill and I welcome it. It is not the full solution but is a very welcome step forward.

Finally, if you would indulge me a minute, Madam Deputy Speaker, this is probably the last time I will speak in the Chamber this year. May I add my good wishes to all the staff of the House for Christmas and the new year? I particularly thank the Clerk of the Transport Committee and her staff who have made me so welcome as the new Chair and have been very helpful steering me in the right direction.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

6.34 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the brand-new Chair of the Transport Committee, and, as someone who serves on the Committee, may I say that it is relief to hear that he is not a lawyer? I also pass on my best wishes to Members—most Members, even in my own party—and Clerks and staff for a very Merry Christmas, and a happy new year when it comes.

When the previous, previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), brought forward the nine-point plan to protect seafarers, I genuinely welcomed the action outlined that day. However, the strength of his words must be followed by the strength and urgency of actions. We welcome the intent behind the Bill to tackle companies that fail to observe even the most basic employment rights while operating from ports in the UK but, clearly, there are areas where this Bill could, should and must be strengthened.

Before I come to the substance of the Bill, could the Minister give us a little more detail on the Government's progress with their overarching nine-point plan? Clearly, today we are attempting to deal with point No. 1. Point No. 7 is on taking action against company leaders who break the law. Earlier this year, P&O and its parent company DP World, achieved the rare—perhaps unique—feat of uniting the Institute of Directors, the TUC, the CBI and the RMT, alongside Nautilus and Members across the House, in their condemnation of P&O's actions against its staff. The chief executive, Peter Hebblethwaite, appeared before a Joint Committee of Parliament and admitted that his company deliberately broke the law when it dismissed 786 employees with no consultation and no notice.

Mr Hebblethwaite still hangs around P&O Ferries like a bad smell—an albatross around the neck of a company that is now a byword for corporate greed and bullying. He recently had the honour of being named the worst boss in the world by the International Trade Union Confederation, beating out the likes of the chief executive officers of Amazon, Starbucks and Emirates airlines. That is quite an achievement for a relative newcomer. I am sure that his trophy will have pride of place on his mantelpiece.

[Gavin Newlands]

It is doubtful that P&O's reputation will ever recover—quite rightly—but as it stands, it is clear that provisions in the Bill will need to be beefed up in Committee. I hope that the Secretary of State and his ministerial team are feeling festive, because I have a list for them. I am sure the House would agree that I have been very good this year.

First on the list is roster patterns. For reasons passing understanding, the Government suddenly rejected the previously agreed roster pattern in the seafarers' charter to commission further research into roster patterns and crewing levels. That was despite the collectively agreed standard in place at Stena and DFDS, and evidence of the danger that crew fatigue poses to maritime safety.

The RMT gave an example of P&O staff having worked one week on, one week off, as has been mentioned, on the Dover-Calais route where 75% of the jobs were lost. The agency crew who replaced them work much longer—in the case of Indian Able Seafarers, up to 17 weeks for at least 12 hours a day, seven days a week without shore leave. P&O is making bigger savings from that dangerous change to roster patterns than it is from the sub-national minimum wage rates of pay.

Crewing levels must be addressed. For those who do not know, crewing levels are the ratio of full-time-equivalent positions required to maintain the vessel in service for each rank or role required. P&O used to operate with a crewing factor of four. They now operate with a crewing factor of just over two. That does not sound safe or advisable. The charter must be incorporated into the Bill if it is to be properly effective. The fact that those operators that seek to exploit workers are complaining should tell the Minister all he needs to know.

The Government defeated amendments in the Lords to reinstate the Government's previous position of setting the qualification threshold at 52 visits per year. The 120-visit threshold may well allow operators to port hop or design routes to avoid having to make declarations about the national minimum wage equivalent. We must also ensure that accommodation costs cannot be deducted from the national minimum wage equivalent. P&O could potentially deduct over £1,000, and Irish Ferries nearly £500, from a non-qualifying seafarer's wage if the accommodation offset is available to it under secondary regulations in the Bill.

While extending national minimum wage coverage is welcome, we would like to see ways of introducing other employment protections that are available to those working on land in the UK, such as better rights to redundancy pay, sick pay and consultation, and a clear statement in legislation of exactly how much those rogue operators who try to avoid compliance with the new regime will forfeit to the Exchequer. We will also be looking for assurances on the kind of action that the Government and port operators will be empowered to take against rogue employers. We all saw Mr Hebblethwaite brazenly sitting in front of the Committee happily agreeing that he and his colleagues had broken the law, knowing that the likelihood of any sanctions against them as controlling minds was minimal. Making something against the law is not the same as making people comply with that law. We want to see a sanctions regime that has teeth. The Insolvency Service is still dragging its feet, citing a lack of legal clarity as to whether the dismissed seafarers

worked outside Great Britain. The Government must accept amendments to the Bill to close these legal loopholes if they are truly committed to preventing a repeat of the unlawful actions of P&O.

It might be outside the current scope of the Bill, but I would like to see the Government take the lead internationally to amend and improve the current maritime law to boost employment rights for all seafarers around the world, as those changes would also improve the lot of maritime workers here. As a result of this Government merely announcing action, the French Government were prompted into taking similar action. That shows that there is an appetite elsewhere to improve the lot of seafarers across borders and across the water. In the UK Government's own words from just a few years back, the UK is one of the world's leading maritime nations, so perhaps it is time to leverage that leadership into a fairer deal for workers across the world, rather than only for those—while fully appreciating our international obligations—who will be covered by the Bill. We also need to ensure that all those who serve the ever-growing offshore wind sector are protected. This Bill does not protect most of those workers.

I very much agree with the Law Society of Scotland's view that it is unclear how harbour authorities will resource, upskill staff and cover costs to be able to undertake these additional tasks and obligations. Enforcement will be needed for these measures to be of the greatest benefit, and this will require sufficient resourcing. We also anticipate that processes will require to be set up between the Secretary of State, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the harbour authorities to manage the requirements, powers and duties in the Bill in practical terms. It also points out, notwithstanding the point that the Secretary of State made in opening the debate, the deviation of the description of a vessel in this Bill from the description in the Merchant Shipping Act 1995, which includes every description of vessel used in navigation. This should be addressed not just for consistency's sake but to close any loopholes that this may unintentionally open.

There is quite a lot to fix, and we have only one Committee day to do it. I think it is fair to say that the Government's record on workers' rights has been deplorable. With this one Bill, the Tories claim to be supporting workers while they plan others that will roll back workers' rights and attack the right to collective bargaining. This Bill will make welcome but small changes for a small number of workers while at the same time the Government are promising new anti-union laws for millions of others. What was originally planned as a limited transport striking law designed to prevent railway strikes seems to have morphed into a wider anti-union move that the Tories claim will save lives and prevent disruption. Despite their claims, it is the Tories themselves who are responsible for this winter's disruption.

All of this is on the back of the Government's appalling response to fire and rehire, which has seen hundreds of thousands of workers faced with the threat of redundancy or a lower wage. I am sure that workers who were forced out or who are on inferior contracts at British Airways, British Gas, Go North West, Tesco and Menzies Aviation, to name but a few, will be pleased that the Government are trying to do something, but they will look at these plans and think, "Where was our help in our time of need?" The Government had plenty of opportunity. I brought forward three Bills to deal with fire and rehire,

and the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) had a private Member's Bill, but the Government thought that a simple change to guidance would deal with it. I totally agree with the question from the Labour shadow Secretary of State: where is the code? We were promised it long before now and we have not heard a thing about it.

It might be churlish of me—but I hope the House will allow me a bit of festive churlishness—to point out that the RMT that the UK Government were working closely alongside in March this year, when P&O Ferries put in motion its despicable actions, is the same RMT that the UK Government have been baiting in public and in private over its industrial dispute with employers. Perhaps if other areas of the Department for Transport could revisit that spring spirit and fuse it with some festive spirit, they might remember that trade unions and workers are there to help improve working conditions and will work with Governments of all political stripes—even this one—rather than be reviled and demonised for their work.

I will stop now before I am accused of turning even more into Ebenezer Scrooge. In the Christmas spirit, I will close by saying that this is a welcome Bill that we very much support in principle, but we need to work with the Government to improve it, alongside the trade unions and staff whose working conditions will be improved by it. I look forward to that work and hope that it is as constructive as the Minister has been thus far.

6.45 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I am pleased to be able to speak in support of this very welcome measure, but this should be only the start of what we do to improve the working conditions for seafarers, and not just in our own waters but globally. It is a fact that when we look at where companies are able to exploit migrant labour and other workers, our shipping industry is perhaps one of the most notorious. Following the successful World cup in Qatar, where lots of issues regarding migrant workers were raised, I think that shining a light on some of the practices in the shipping industry would be welcome.

The act of industrial vandalism perpetrated on British workers by P&O Ferries was absolutely disgusting, and I am pleased that the whole House came together to condemn that practice at the time. I commend the Government for being quite fleet of foot in bringing forward this legislation. It proves that they can be fleet of foot when they choose to be, and I hope to see more of this when problems and, in particular, injustices are highlighted. But of course this Bill is limited to EU traffic, particularly on the short seas—the kind of traffic that goes from and attends our ports in Hull, Dover and Holyhead.

I represent what I like to describe as the ports capital of the UK, in Thurrock, after the port of London moved east from the London docks to my constituency. This has been a challenging period for us. DP World owns the new London Gateway port, the newest deep-sea port in the country. We have been working hard to have good relations with the British management of that port, but we were equally condemnatory of the actions of the parent company, through P&O Ferries, towards those workers. I am keen to ensure that the management at London Gateway understand that we in Thurrock

thought that was completely unacceptable. We want to labour that point, not least to protect the thousands of workers in my constituency who are employed by that company. It is important that this House sends a message to companies that wish to invest in our country that there are things we will not put up with, and that what passes for reasonable employment practice in their own jurisdiction will not pass in ours. It is important that that principle is hammered home.

We also have ports in Thurrock that serve European traffic, and they have a very different business model from those to which this legislation is directed. I highlight particularly the integrated port and shipping operation run by CLdN at Purfleet, and Britain's newest port at Tilbury 2, which also serves the European market. It is a different model because we are talking about unaccompanied roll-on roll-off freight. For example, at Dover the HGV drivers will accompany their cargo straight on and off and hit the road, but those ships arriving from Europe at Purfleet and Tilbury are undertaking a much longer journey to make that crossing. They are not accompanied; a driver drops them off at one end, and another driver picks them up at the other. I register with the Minister that the regulations currently being drafted to address the particular situation of short seas should perhaps be used more sensitively than the regulations covering other kinds of economic operation.

As has been highlighted, these minimum wage regulations are directed at ships that regularly attend British ports. The truth of the matter is that the ports of Tilbury and London Gateway deal with very large ships that make multiple stops around the world. Fifty years ago, some of the people working on those ships would have been my constituents, but today, frankly, my constituents are too expensive. The ships are now staffed by Filipinos, Thais and a lot of Ukrainians—I will come back to them—and we need to think about their welfare, too. I know the Government have made that case through their role in the International Maritime Organisation. If there is one thing for which I am grateful to P&O Ferries, it is for giving us the opportunity to shine a light on how our global seafaring population needs more support and more attention to its welfare.

We have heard about what would be the most appropriate enforcement authority. I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), the Chair of the Transport Committee, said about the MCA. I have seen at first hand how the MCA took action to regulate behaviour towards seafarers during the pandemic, when a number of cruise ships were stranded at Tilbury. Frankly, the seafarers on those ships were in a terrible state. They did not know how long they would be stuck there, and their welfare conditions were truly appalling. The MCA took decisive action to improve their welfare.

As we head towards Christmas, people do not worry about how the items they have purchased and wrapped to put under the Christmas tree got to the shop. The fact is that we rely on our seafarers to keep us fed and watered, and they did a fantastic job during the pandemic. The shelves were full when we went to the supermarket because the seafarers kept working. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) is nodding in agreement, and he did a fantastic job of championing them. His door was always open when I was doing my best to represent the welfare of that community, and I thank him for everything he did.

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

He was a truly excellent maritime Minister who did much to elevate maritime issues within Government. We do not worry too much about how things get on to the shelves, but the truth is that many people are paid not very much money and work in terrible conditions to make sure they do.

My annual treat is going down to the Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest in Tilbury to wrap Christmas presents. We give out 3,000 presents, supported by voluntary donations. Every seafarer who passes through the port of London gets a present and a Christmas card from my constituents. The present consists of toiletries, chocolates, some London mementos and a hand-knitted hat made by Tilbury's knitting community. It is a special thing to do because those seafarers are away from their family, and the gift shows that someone has thought about them.

I particularly highlight the welfare of Ukrainian seafarers passing through the port of Tilbury this Christmas. They are away from their family, and they are clearly very worried about them. I am pleased that we are giving them SIM cards so that they can contact their family. I thank the Department for Transport for funding the wi-fi routers that give us that facility.

I wish this Bill well, and I want it to be on the statute book as soon as possible so that we can raise the standards of behaviour towards seafarers who work on our European seas. I log my clear message to Ministers that we must also do more to raise global standards for our seafarers.

6.55 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I do not intend to detain the House for very long, but I am grateful to speak in this very important debate.

I am concerned that the Bill simply does not go far enough, but I pay tribute to the former maritime Minister, the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), and the former Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), for their work in putting the Bill together in such short time.

I have three chief concerns. The first is about enforcement, as there is a clear conflict. When a port operator also happens to be a ferry operator, it is incredibly unlikely to take the necessary action on the measures in this Bill.

Roster patterns are also a major concern. The 800 sacked British ratings—800 men and women—were paid, on average, about £28,000 a year, and they have been replaced, in the Dover-Calais example, by Indian seafarers on £4 an hour. That is bad enough, but the safety-critical issue is the fact that they work 17 weeks on, seven days a week, without shore leave, and they do 12-hour days. We should not need to be reminded of the Herald of Free Enterprise disaster, in which 193 seafarers and passengers were lost. The Bill desperately needs to be improved on that issue.

I am also concerned about the definition of “regular operator” and “port of call.” For example, the requirement for 120 visits to a port means the ferries sailing out of Hull will not be caught by the Bill, so the number needs to be much smaller—52 visits ought to be accepted by the Government. If a ferry leaves and returns to the same port, that is where it lives and where its crew members would be expected to reside, so 52 visits

should help in that regard. As currently drafted, the ferries sailing out of Hull will not be caught by these provisions.

When I visit schools in my constituency, children often talk about the job they want to do. They live and are schooled in the shadow of the docks, and they see those big vessels, so they often think about having a decent, prosperous career at sea. Sadly, they do not have the opportunity to enjoy a career at sea.

I give credit to the hon. Member for Witney and the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield for doing a lot of work in short time to address the P&O Ferries scandal, but the legislation must be improved to prevent the likes of P&O Ferries from treating seafarers in that terrible way.

6.59 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a great pleasure and honour to speak in this debate, and in particular to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner). I hope he will not mind if I say that he was always extremely challengingly constructive, and I very much enjoyed and valued the interaction we had when I held that brief. I did think twice about whether I ought to speak in this debate, because as the maritime Minister at the time of this scandal and of the early stages of the legislation being drafted, to a certain extent I am marking my own homework, even if it is the poor old Minister who has to defend things at the end of the debate.

I came to care deeply about this issue during the course of my time as maritime Minister, partly because of some of the seafarers I met in Dover just after this happened, and partly because of the interaction I had with many hon. and right hon. Members across the House. I rise to record just a few thoughts about the Bill and where we go from here. Before I do, I hope I may be permitted a moment of indulgence just to thank the maritime directorate at the Department for Transport, with whom I worked so closely over some tumultuous times. With their good humour, boundless expertise and incredible passion for everything they do, they are a true credit to the finest traditions of their service. It was a great pleasure and honour to work with them, and I thank them for everything they did to see me through the difficult, challenging two years that we had.

The civil service often likes to say it works at pace, and that is often true, but it was never as true as it was during the formation of this Bill. As the hon. Member just said, this scandal broke and we had to take action. The Government of whom I and the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) and the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) formed a part felt extremely strongly about it, so we worked at great speed. All the civil servants who worked on it were incredible in those weeks and months, and I thank them for that. Finally on this note—I apologise to the Members who are not lawyers; I am a lawyer, or a recovering lawyer as I like to say—I am grateful to the civil servants for having allowed me to crawl all over the legislation and pick away at bits of it, and I hope it is slightly better as a result.

Taking a moment to dwell on why this Bill is necessary, the decision by P&O Ferries that we have heard about was despicable—I make it clear at the outset that I am

talking about P&O Ferries as distinct from P&O Cruises, which bears no responsibility for it. Those 786 seafarers were made redundant without prior notice or consultation, to be replaced by agency workers who would be paid less than the national minimum. It was an extraordinary moment of shameful behaviour from a company. We will all remember that incredible Zoom call when they were dismissed by video conference. It is emblematic of all the issues we are dealing with today.

When I went back to my constituency that weekend—my landlocked, rural, Oxfordshire constituency—the people at every single door I knocked on were livid at how P&O had behaved, and every single one commended the Government's strong action. I think the disgust of those in west Oxfordshire and more widely was down to two reasons. First, it was because P&O is an iconic British brand. It is one of those brands that sits along with the Red Arrows, or Cadbury or Rolls-Royce, as a quality marque that shows the country stands for the highest standards not just in products, but in people.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, P&O Ferries violated some unwritten rules of decency, fair play and valuing the people who work for them—all those things that mark the UK out as a special place to live. P&O Ferries took those things, valued them at nought and broke them, and that was a wicked thing to have done. No excuses will do. This is not about P&O's balance sheet or what it chose to do to try to make recompense to those seafarers afterwards; it is about something very simple: the way that people should be treated. These people have given their lives to learn a trade that is difficult, vital and frequently dangerous, and to be treated in that way is not how Britain does business.

What P&O Ferries did that day was to suggest that those seafarers did not matter. It suggested that people who had devoted their lives and labour in that way did not matter and could be replaced like a machine with something cheaper. That is what the people of west Oxfordshire were angry about that weekend, and that anger is as nothing compared with the anger of the people of Dover and Hull, and rightly so. P&O Ferries violated the British sense of fairness. It is more than just a brand; it is a sense of doing the right thing—of decency, hard work and commitment paying off.

Some months later, Peter Hebblethwaite—he of that truly infamous Select Committee appearance—had the cheek to suggest that the dispute that there was and remains over how he treated his workers was of historic interest, as if the Government should just accept it and move on, as if it did not matter or had not happened. Well, this is a historic matter, but not in the way that Mr Hebblethwaite thought; this is a historic matter, because what this House of Commons said then, and is going to say now in all our different ways, is that maritime really matters, seafarers really matter, ships really matter and how we treat people really matters.

We are going to make sure, through this legislation and everything else, that how P&O treated its seafarers on that day will never happen again; and, more than that, we are going to take a historic look at how maritime and seafarers are treated in this country and ensure that this great industry is treated how it should be, right at the heart of this great country. That is what the nine-point plan that we have heard about already intended to do, and I know that the Government will continue to do more.

I am mindful of time, and others want to speak, so I will not go through the Bill in detail, as many others will wish to do that, as well. I will echo some of the points made by Members from both sides of the House about how it is essential to see this Bill as a starting point. The Bill is important, but it does not of itself solve the issue. Another reason I am pleased to speak today is that this is one of the first times in recent memory when the House has considered maritime legislation as a whole. There has been a lot of specific legislation—bits on safety and so forth—but for the last substantial bit of maritime legislation, we have to go all the way back to the Merchant Shipping Act 1995, and even that just pulled together bits of legislation from earlier years.

In the past, Parliament has tended to look at maritime as a functional thing—a way of getting from A to B—and not looked holistically at what it brings to the life of the nation. Of course, what maritime brings to the life of the nation is vast. We are talking about trade, highly skilled jobs, and British influence way beyond these shores. I want to ensure—I know I will have the agreement of many other Members of this House—that the value of what maritime business brings is truly understood by the Government. I am not suggesting wholesale Government intervention, as this is a privately run, privately operated industry, and for the most part is much the better for that, but some measures could be taken, particularly in the areas of regulation and fiscal policy, that could help the maritime sector to grow.

The Department's excellent "Maritime 2050" programme must be supported and continued, but I would like the Government also to focus on a number of other things that I will briefly talk through. The first is seafarers' training. We need to expand the training commitment under the tonnage tax and support the work of the Maritime Skills Commission and the Merchant Navy Training Board, because children growing up in the constituency of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East, or in Dover, Tilbury or so many other areas, must be able to look out of their window, to see those vessels and think, "That is a fascinating career," and should know how to go about achieving it and have the jobs available at the end of the day, such that they can go and do it. Training is key to that. We have to have British seafarers trained—both officers and ratings—if we want to have a thriving merchant fleet.

The second point I wish to raise is about the importance of the UK flag. Ships registered on the UK ship register are not just a matter of national pride, although it is always great to see the red ensign fluttering from the stern of a ship; this is so important because, in simple terms, flying the red ensign makes that ship a floating piece of Britain, which means that the standards we enjoy in this country are more easily applied to it. Increasing the number of ships on the UK ship register is one of the most important things that can be done to help seafarers' pay, welfare and standards, to which attention has rightly been drawn already. This is about more than pay; it is about welfare and standards as well. This is very complex work, and there is too much here for me to go into at the moment, but a number of things have to be done. Some of this has to be done internationally, and I urge the Government to look at what can be done at the International Maritime Organisation, particularly on the issue of flags of convenience, which is a major part of this.

[Robert Courts]

I also wish to draw attention to the issue of investment in British shipbuilding—a massive topic that, again, I cannot go into in any detail. When we look at the decline of the merchant fleet since the first world war, and even more so since the second world war, we see that the lack of attractiveness as a place to invest in British shipping is a big part of what has happened. Only by increasing British ship ownership, through targeted fiscal measures and creating the right regulatory environment in which to work, can we have the British standards, pay and welfare we would expect, as well as providing the extraordinary strategic reserve that a merchant fleet is able to give, as of course we saw during the Falklands war.

The tonnage tax reforms that were announced last year by the then Chancellor, now our Prime Minister, are hugely welcome. They are due to be reviewed again next year, and I ask the Government to look creatively at what can be done there, through tonnage tax and wider fiscal measures. I would like the Government and the Minister to respond on some of those points.

I shall make a couple of concluding points. As I said at the beginning, maritime matters. We have understood the way maritime matters and the way seafarers matter to this country as never before. As my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) has just said, during the pandemic we saw them in all weathers, day and night, whether there was covid or whether there was no covid, constantly working to make sure that we had the food, medicine and wider supplies we needed. They were not complaining, and it is vital that we support them in due course. But maritime will matter only when seafarers' welfare and training matters as much as their wages, and when shipping ownership and the red ensign are given the attention that they deserve.

This Bill is a good start, but it is only a start. There is a wide, delicate maritime ecosystem that needs wide attention, which is what I am asking the Government to give here. There has never been a successful trading nation without its own maritime fleet and without the seafarers to man those ships. Global Britain, an independent trade policy and Britain on the world stage will not count for anything without maritime. Maritime is essential, seafarers are essential, and we must do more.

7.13 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): P&O Ferries' actions earlier this year to make 800 seafarers redundant and replace them with agency staff on just over £4 per hour were shameful, illegal and immoral, and they were rightly condemned across the House at the time, and indeed in this debate. But I must say that that would never have happened in the first place if former Ministers had listened to the warnings from the RMT and Nautilus International, and many others, about the loopholes that put maritime workers at particular risk. That advice should have been heeded in the past. The Government could have strengthened protections for workers, and they still can, to end the immoral practice of fire and rehire. That needs to happen.

In the aftermath of this shameful episode, the then Prime Minister and the Government promised that these issues would be dealt with, and that there would be clear and serious consequences, and of course better

protections. Six months on, we are yet to see the legal action that was promised materialise, as has been pointed out by the shadow Secretary of State. Although this Bill steps forward, it falls short of the employment protections promised. Indeed, the Secretary of State referred to its narrow scope and its limited impact, and focused on those issues.

The Bill does not take the opportunity, desperately needed, to effectively restore collective bargaining for ferry staff, and raise employment standards across the board. Other hon. Members have referred to rostering, hours and shore leave. What about pensions, apprenticeships and training, an issue mentioned by Members from across the House? Those are other areas where workers can be exploited, and we all know that P&O ferries and others will do exactly that.

The Bill is also a missed opportunity to get the detail right on protecting seafarers. We know the P&O Ferries will exploit any loophole it can, so let us make the protections for seafaring staff ironclad. We need to ensure that a minimum wage equivalent has the tools for strong enforcement measures. We need to end clear existing loopholes that employers such as P&O Ferries and many more are able to exploit, such as moving between ports to avoid the necessary regulations that have been placed in the Bill and operating ferry services while collecting national minimum wage fines as a port authority—there is a clear conflict of interest there, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) and the new Chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart). While amending this legislation to ensure these loopholes are closed and protections are enforced, we still need justice—social justice, employment justice—for the 800 P&O staff and their families, and those responsible need to be held to account.

Grahame Morris: I share my hon. Friend's anger and outrage at those job losses and the way those men were treated by P&O. Does he share my outrage that the Government have subsequently given £50 million to P&O's parent company, DP World, in order to facilitate the freeports at Southampton and London Gateway? Is that not absolute nonsense?

Mike Amesbury: I concur on that, and the smell of hypocrisy is somewhat nauseating across the Chamber.

We are still without answers as to why the CEO of P&O Ferries felt empowered enough to tell Parliament—to tell the Select Committee—that they were breaking the law. Why have they still have not faced the consequences for their actions? Why have heads not rolled? Why are Ministers not stepping in to ensure that that happens? Again, we are talking about not only justice for the seafarers concerned and their families, but creating that landscape of good employment and good employment practices in this country.

In conclusion, the P&O Ferries scandal must be the end of the exploitation of seafaring staff in this country, but in its current state the Bill falls far short of that. It is a starter for 10, which I will certainly be supporting it, along with His Majesty's official Opposition. However, I will also be supporting amendments that will make it far stronger, to ensure that we have a race to the top, rather than a race to the bottom on employment rights. Finally, let me wish everybody a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

7.18 pm

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Not only has 2022 been a year of opportunity, new jobs, higher wages and investment across Dover and Deal, but it has been a difficult and challenging year, with a number of significant and sometimes shocking events occurring around our sea border. Looking back to this time last year, I would not have expected to see a household name, a much-loved part of the Dover landscape, a global company headquartered in the town, become a pariah and a disgrace, not just in the maritime community, but in the business world. That is what the directors of P&O Ferries made it in March 2022. P&O's management is a total disgrace, and it has put a stain on the name of this great company. In March, I wrote to the Insolvency Service, calling on it to consider director disqualification action against the named directors of P&O Ferries Ltd and its parent company, P&O Ferries Holding Ltd, on the basis of the directors' misconduct.

The Insolvency Service has a responsibility to uphold confidence in directors and to hold them to account for serious misconduct. The response from the service has been wholly inadequate so far. I ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to press the Insolvency Service to step in and do its job—to hold those P&O directors to account for their reprehensible, immoral and unlawful conduct. I still have constituents who have not been compensated properly for lost or stolen belongings. I ask the Minister to meet me to see how my constituents can be helped, so that this matter can finally be resolved for them.

In relation to the well-made comments on the intensity of the channel route, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency looked at these issues for Irish Ferries when it came into Dover and for P&O when it tried to stand up its agency workers and was not allowed to do so because they were not good and ready. I ask the Minister to have a conversation with the agency and then for us to meet further to discuss how assurances can be given that the intensity of the channel route is being properly monitored and considered in relation to the safety of workers and passengers on it.

Looking back to the sackings in March, I was glad to take up an offer from Darren Procter of the RMT union to march with the workers, my constituents in Dover Town, along with other prominent local Conservatives. As the local MP, I supported workers in two previous restructurings of the workforce of P&O, working with the unions and speaking to the management of P&O. It was completely untrue, therefore, for P&O to seek to blame predicted union militancy by RMT for its disgraceful management behaviour, because previous restructurings had been by negotiated settlement.

P&O did not even try to negotiate. It just decided that it would break the law. None the less, it is true that, on the day I marched with the RMT, we did see the ugly face of the militant unions and the Labour party. It is also true that the Labour party saw an opportunity to exploit the shocking corporate behaviour of P&O, just as we have heard that it intends not to fully and unequivocally support the measures of this important Bill today.

As I was surrounded by bused-in, hard-left aggressive militants outside the RMT headquarters in Dover, I was rescued by local union members whom I know and

who brought me into the building for my safety. Imagine my shock when I saw the leadership of the RMT—Mick Lynch no less—and other trade union barons holding a Zoom meeting with none other than the Labour leader, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). While I was in that private meeting, I was shocked to hear how the Labour leader and the trade union barons were chatting away about exploiting the P&O situation in Parliament for political gain in those coming days, and how the unions could create a winter of discontent, stoked up by trade unions here. It seemed to me, listening to everyone that day, that they were working hand in glove with the Labour leadership.

Back then, in the spring, I thought that it was just wishful thinking on the part of Labour and the trade union barons. Now Mick Lynch has turned into the Christmas Grinch and the winter of union trouble making is well and truly under way—and not a word of condemnation from those on the Labour Front Bench, and I think that we all know why.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): As a Scottish nationalist MP, there is not a lot of love lost between me and the Labour party. It certainly comes as a surprise to me to hear that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) is very much in cahoots with the unions. I think that he could do an awful lot more to stand up for Labour values. However, at the heart of all of this are the hon. Lady's constituents who were treated incredibly badly by P&O. The issue here is not the RMT union; the issue here is P&O Ferries, which has acted disgracefully. I urge her to try to get back to that point, which is what the Bill is about.

Mrs Elphicke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As I have made it very clear, as the Dover MP, I have worked very constructively with the RMT, and particularly with the local branch. What I saw that day was the Labour leader on Zoom, and it seemed to me from that meeting that he was looking for political opportunism, rather than having the interests of my constituents at heart. I am therefore very pleased that so many Members on the Opposition Benches now speak so freely about my constituents, but I urge them to fully support the Bill, and not to seek to create division and engage in shameless political opportunism on what they know is a very specific Bill, as they have already done in the Lords.

Richard Burgon: We do not seek to oppose the Bill. We seek to strengthen it and improve it, but I do have a question for the hon. Member. She has repeatedly referred in her speech to "trade union barons". Will she take this opportunity to make it clear that trade union leaders—of the RMT and other unions—are not barons, because they are elected by their members? Would it not be helpful to stop using this silly, right-wing tabloid language of "barons"? They are not barons. They are elected leaders—elected by many more people than some Conservative Prime Ministers.

Mrs Elphicke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I think he has made his point about his choice of language, in the same way that I have made mine.

[Mrs Elphicke]

As we look forward to the Bill going through Committee, I urge Opposition Members not to seek to create division in the name of improvement, when in fact they are making amendments that are outside the scope of the Bill. It is this Conservative Government who are prioritising fair pay and equal rights for our workers on land and at sea. We are applying the minimum wage to ensure that we do not see a race to the bottom of foreign crews and cheap labour, helping to secure the future of the workforce on the short straits.

In Dover, the maritime industry is part of our DNA. I just visited Viking's Maritime Skills Academy in Dover, which trains seafarers in fire and sea rescue safety. Like a number of local businesses, it has worked really hard to support those in P&O who have lost their jobs, and I pay tribute to all those across my constituency who have come together to help. It is a reminder that, from training to deployment, Dover has a central role in the maritime community. With that central role, I would like to see this Bill accompanied by further international steps to improve the pay and conditions of international seafarers.

The conditions for some international seafarers are nothing short of slavery. That point was very well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). We have a moral responsibility to address that. We have taken action to address the use of sweat shops on land in other countries. We must show international leadership in tackling the sweat shops at sea—the shocking conditions for international seafarers, particularly those from poorer countries. We must also go further in completing bilateral agreements with port-to-port European and other counterparts, so as to ensure that standards, safety and training meet the demands of the sea. As I raised with the Secretary of State earlier, it is those bilateral agreements on which we should be focusing the specific needs of the channel routes.

Today's Bill is one that I strongly welcome. It will help to ensure that the financial incentives that led to the decision-making of P&O Ferries will be neutralised. It will help to avoid the race to the bottom and shore up jobs here in the UK ports. It is an important and focused Bill to plug a gap in employment law to ensure that British workers operating at sea between Dover and Calais will be treated just the same as workers operating in Dover itself.

I would like to finish by saying how grateful I am for the work of a number of right hon. and hon. Friends, in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) and my hon. Friends the Members for Witney (Robert Courts), for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) and for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who all worked so hard alongside me on this P&O situation, understood it for the disgrace it was and showed determination to push forward on the nine-point plan for action. I know my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Minister will be following through on that to ensure that such a situation cannot happen in the same way again.

This Bill shows it is the Conservative party that is on the side of seafarers. It is the Conservative party that is the party of the workers. It is the Government who

support jobs, training and pay to protect British workers, including all those excellent workers at Dover and those who work on the short straits.

7.30 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), particularly with some of the late Christmas cracker jokes she was deploying in the Chamber there.

As we approach the recess, many of us will have our usual favourite films and programmes to watch as we rest up on the couch, recovering from the excesses of Christmas and new year celebrations. For some it may be "Miracle on 34th Street", "Home Alone" or that classic "It's a Wonderful Life". I personally look forward to the now-annual mockumentary on Netflix, previously called "Death to 2020" or "Death to 2021". I have no doubt that the March segment of "Death to 2022" will feature the disgraceful behaviour of P&O Ferries and its chief executive officer Peter Hebblethwaite—who would surely make Scrooge look like Bambi—as it chronicles the outrageous decision to fire nearly 800 directly employed seafarers on these islands.

In watching the Netflix mockumentary, I suddenly remember all the appalling things that unfolded in the year just past. However, for many seafarers, including those who live in my East End constituency, the P&O tragedy is much more than a mere three or four-minute segment of a documentary. While the P&O dispute is long buried in most folks' memories, it is important to understand how and why we came to that position and how we can improve things.

Although the previous Prime Minister—I mean the second-to-last one—had said that Ministers would be taking legal action, the Insolvency Service quietly dropped criminal prosecution of P&O Ferries. While the actions of P&O Ferries were disgusting and deeply unethical, they highlighted some serious weaknesses in employment law, not to mention refuelling the "fire and rehire" issue that continues to plague ordinary workers and be a plaything of unscrupulous bosses in boardrooms across the land. That is why many of us on the Opposition Benches have been disappointed that the long-awaited post-Brexit employment Bill never materialised and why many of us would, frankly, now be surprised to see one this side of a general election.

The Bill before the House tonight—just a day before we rise for our Christmas recess—is obviously not one that should be opposed, but I think there is a broad consensus in the debate, including on the Conservative Benches, that it is not a silver bullet, nor will it fix the problems it seeks to remedy. The Bill needs significant amendment and improvement, as many of my constituents have made clear.

I was struck by the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) referring to the fact that he represents a rural, landlocked constituency in Oxfordshire. Similarly, in my small city constituency I have a number of RMT members, particularly seafarers, who have worked on P&O Ferries. My constituent from Barlanark wants the Bill improved to increase seafarer jobs and build our green maritime skills base. Another constituent from Easterhouse who wrote to me wants to see the Bill amended to promote collectively bargained terms and conditions, as is the case, for example, in France.

Likewise, another constituent believes the Bill must support domestic seafarer jobs on the international routes that keep the economy of these islands functioning and secure. Lastly, an email from a resident of Sandyhills gets to the nub of the issue here, state-sanctioned pay exploitation, highlighting that P&O Ferries pays under £4 per hour on contracts of up to 17 weeks. Ministers regularly stand up at the Dispatch Box and tell us that work is the best route out of poverty—but not, it would appear, for a seafarer.

Many hon. Members have outlined and will outline how the Bill can be improved, particularly as it moves into Committee, but I want to touch on just a few things this evening. I am particularly grateful to colleagues in the RMT, which I am proud to support, for their briefing on this Bill. More generally, I send my continued solidarity and best wishes to their rail members who are engaged in an industrial dispute. I have certainly been proud to join them on picket lines, and I have no expectation that my party leader will ask for me to be fired or anything like that as a result of doing so.

However, coming back to the Bill, it would be fair to say that it must be widened in scope. In my opinion and that of many others, it is too narrowly drawn, a point made by peers when it started its legislative journey in the other place. The Bill would, I believe, benefit from being widened in scope to tackle some of the wider conditions that P&O and other operators use to exploit and recruit crew on pay and conditions that undercut UK-based seafarers and responsible operators.

Fundamentally, in its current form, the Bill does not address the nationality-based pay discrimination on ships that routinely work from UK ports, regardless of flag or crew nationality. There is a real risk that this Bill's passing unamended would lead to avoidance techniques such as changes to port call schedules, which have already been referred to. Basically, port-hopping becomes more likely the more frequently a vessel calls at a UK port.

The RMT briefing, for example, makes it clear that at 120 calls per year, it would be far easier for operators to make very modest changes to scheduled port calls in order to avoid this legislation, whereas 52 calls would be far tighter and was, I understand, the Government's intention when the Bill was launched. Looking at the *Hansard* from when the Bill went through the Lords, I can see no legitimate reason why the Government departed from 52 weeks after the consultation, especially when there was widespread support for it from trade unions.

Baroness Vere is on record in the other place saying:

"I do not think operators would play switcheroo with UK ports because, frankly, their customers would not put up with it."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 26 October 2022; Vol. 824, c. 1506.]

In short, the Minister is saying that it will be all right on the night and we should just leave it to market conditions to dictate the direction of travel. However, I remind Ministers that the whole reason we are in this sorry mess in the first place is precisely a lack of regulation and an increasing tolerance for casino-style decision making on the part of bosses who have shamelessly, and unquestionably, exploited staff. We should learn that leaving it to the market will not necessarily be helpful.

There is one other aspect of the Bill I want to draw to the attention of the House before I conclude. It relates to offshore wind and the renewables sector, something particularly pertinent to Scotland. At the moment, as I understand it, crew working on vessels servicing the offshore oil and gas industry are entitled to protection when it comes to national minimum wage legislation, but that protection is not extended to crew, sometimes on the same ships, who work instead on offshore windfarms in the UK exclusive economic zone. That point was respected by the Minister in Grand Committee in the House of Lords, so it is clearly an issue for the Government. As an MP from Scotland, where we have a burgeoning offshore and renewables sector, that gap concerns me greatly and I believe it must be plugged.

All that makes the point that the Bill before the House tonight falls short of what is expected following the P&O debacle. The unintended consequences of not tightening things up will, once more, lead to future Parliaments having to come back and fix issues that have been highlighted in this debate and will only prolong the injustice faced by seafarers.

I started my remarks tonight by talking about the films we all watch during the Christmas holidays. I rather fear that, if this Bill was made into a film, it could quite easily be called "A Missed Opportunity". Let us ensure that that is not the case, and instead bring the Bill into dry dock for major repair and improvement when this legislation is considered in Committee.

7.38 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I have listened to all the contributions with great interest. There is clearly a consensus developing that, although this Bill is a step in the right direction, it is completely inadequate to the scale of the situation seafarers face.

Who can forget those appalling scenes when balaclava-wearing, handcuff-trained security guards were sent on to the ships to remove P&O workers? That was a real wake-up call about the reality of employment law in this country and more widely. What worries me is that the Bill is full of loopholes—ones that will be exploited by unscrupulous employers. Before I was elected as a Member of Parliament, I was for 10 years a trade union lawyer representing workers, including seafarers. Time and again, I saw ruthless employers exploit loopholes in well-intentioned laws and get away with treating workers like dirt. We cannot allow that to go on. Far from the divisive language of the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), we need to work together to improve the Bill.

What are some of the loopholes? I mentioned in an earlier intervention my concern that when the Bill was drafted, frequent use of a port was defined as a ship calling at a UK port 52 times in a year. That has now been increased to 120 times a year. I am still not clear on why that is the case, but it is logical that if we define regular use of a UK port not as 52 visits but as 120 visits, that is a great loophole for port-hopping and for unscrupulous employers to avoid paying the national minimum wage when they should do so.

There is also a lack of legal clarity on whether dismissed P&O workers resided in Britain. The Insolvency Service has still not pursued legal charges against P&O. The TUC rightly says that that loophole continues in the Bill, and it is therefore clear that it must be closed. It cannot

[Richard Burgon]

be acceptable for this House to be content with a Bill that, following the P&O scandal, does not close the loopholes that allowed P&O Ferries to get away with its behaviour in such a horrific manner.

The Bill does not go far enough on employment protections. We need stronger protections in law. P&O is currently making more savings from the intensive roster patterns forced on agency workers, for example, than it does from paying below minimum wage. It is clear, then, that the national minimum wage provisions in the Bill are not enough on their own, because firms can still undermine workers' rights if minimum wage protections are not coupled with broader employment protections. We see deductions taken from workers' pay for their accommodation, for example, which is completely outrageous.

The Bill does not protect all seafarers, by the way, as has already been mentioned in discussion about workers in the offshore renewables sector. If we want, as we do, a future of well-paid, green and unionised jobs that help us to tackle climate change and solve the ongoing energy crisis, we need to ensure that those jobs are well paid, secure and unionised, not part of a race to the bottom. We need to ensure that offshore workers in the green sector have proper protection as well.

As the Bill progresses, I will introduce or support amendments to close legal loopholes and prevent port-hopping—that is essential—and, crucially, to inscribe a seafarers' charter into law, expand collective employment rights, and ensure that the Maritime and Coastguard Agency has the powers and resources to enforce employment protections. We have already heard in the debate about the conflicts of interest for companies that run ships and have financial interests in ports. We also need the Bill to be changed so that minimum wage rights for seafarers' working in offshore renewables are equalised with the entitlements for those working in the offshore oil and gas industry.

The Bill needs to be amended and strengthened or it will be a huge missed opportunity, which we cannot allow to happen. We all remember the strong feelings in the country, which were reflected on both sides of this Chamber, about what happened at P&O, but we must ask ourselves these questions. First, is it right that, as we have heard, P&O's parent company benefits from Government funding to the tune of £50 million for London Gateway freeport? More importantly and more fundamentally, is it right for this House to be content with legislation that is a tiny step in the right direction—that is why we are not opposing it—but does not go far enough?

The Seafarers' Wages Bill needs vast improvement if it is to be worthy of its name and if it is to prevent what happened at P&O from happening again. If we do not improve it, people outside this House will be very disappointed indeed, because the Bill will not match the speeches made in this House back then and tonight.

7.45 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon). Like him, I feel that a consensus is emerging in this place tonight. We all welcome the Bill, but we welcome it as a first step and see the flaws in it.

I would like to reassure the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) that there is not really any opposition to the Bill, and reassure her constituents that everybody in this House feels very strongly about what happened to those workers who had given their careers, and in many cases their lives, to P&O.

As the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) said, P&O is an iconic company in this country. To many people, it epitomises our seafaring tradition and the merchant marine—people see that in P&O. Like Cunard, P&O is synonymous with the image of Britannia and the waves, so when I look back to March, it is not easy to put aside the shock that came with the news that it had treated almost 800 of its staff so shamefully. It is clear from the reaction in the House tonight that none of us here has been untouched by what we remember from that time. The RMT estimates that 75% of those 800 UK seafarers worked on the Dover-Calais route, as well as on services out of Hull, Liverpool, Cairnryan and Larne. Just about every port in the UK was affected and had constituents who were affected, and landlocked constituencies had families who were affected by what happened. What was also significant about it was that it exposed a major flaw in UK employment legislation as it affects seafarers, and the potential for that major flaw in UK law to be exploited by others.

The Liberal Democrats support the Bill, which has three main principles at its core. Seafarers with close ties to the UK who work aboard services in scope of the Bill but do not qualify for the UK national minimum wage will receive fair pay. The Bill will disincentivise the race to the bottom that we have talked about in employment standards among operators. It will protect the reputation of the UK maritime sector, of which P&O is such an important part, following the disgraceful actions of that company.

However, there are flaws in the Bill. The Liberal Democrats in the other place had three main concerns: the lack of sufficient protections for seafarers; compliance with international conventions and agreements—of which the Bill potentially challenges a number—and the practicalities of implementation and enforcement, which have been raised by the UK Chamber of Shipping, the British Ports Association and trade unions. The RMT in particular wants to see changes to the Bill, including amendments to prevent port-hopping and other avoidance techniques by operators, and to introduce collectively agreed standards for roster patterns, pension rights, crewing levels and training schemes.

When the Bill moves forward into Committee, I urge the Government to take on board those concerns and to ensure that the Bill is improved in the way that I think we all—on both sides of the House—would like to see, for the wellbeing of seafarers, not just at the moment but in the future, in an industry that is in the DNA of this country.

7.49 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Most of the points of detail have been raised by other Members, so I will not focus on those. I will vote for the Bill, but—I am not being party political here, because when it comes to the treatment of seafarers, I have been critical of every party that has been in national Government—the Bill is a mouse, and I do not think that it is a mouse that is going to roar. That is my worry about it.

I was pleased at the cross-party anger about P&O's behaviour. I had expected that to result in a real opportunity to tackle the way in which seafarers are treated, and not just by P&O but historically. I have checked *Hansard*, and the first time I raised in the House the application of the minimum wage to seafarers was in the 2002-03 Session, which was 20 years ago. I blame the Chamber of Shipping, which has been mentioned, and its influence on successive Labour, Conservative and coalition Governments. Time and again, we have pointed out what is technically, in employment terms, a feudal relationship with many seafarers and the way they are treated. It is also a neo-colonialist relationship, given the recruitment practices across the globe. It is a level of exploitation that we would not tolerate in any other sector. People are working long hours in unsafe conditions, on low pay and with limited training. When they complain, they are replaced by labour that is brought to this country from across the globe. They are severely exploited.

Every time we have debated the issue and the Chamber of Shipping has realised that the game is up and that change is necessary—largely through public opprobrium, as happened with P&O, though perhaps not on the same scale in the past—successive attempts at reform by this House have resulted in a standard strategy to be pursued, which is that the Chamber of Shipping, working with the Government, obfuscates, seeks to limit change and the effectiveness of that change, and drafts trench warfare in legislation.

I will give a few examples. In 2002 I said that we should ensure that the minimum wage applied to seafarers in this country on the basis of the Race Relations Act 1976. When lobbying on the Race Relations Act, the shipping industry secured an exemption—the only sector that gained such an exemption. As a result, it was able to exploit workers. We ran a campaign and the Government put their hands up and said, “We accept that there is a wrong here, so we will ensure reform.” That reform was that people could be discriminated against based not on their race but on their nationality. What is the difference? That was the change in legislation.

From 2007 to 2009 we ran a campaign and I raised the issues in this House. When we sought to give some form of legal protection to people, we were told that they could have that legal protection only if they had employment links to this country—and that was ill defined. It just went on like that. I have example after example of us campaigning for reform and being met with obfuscation and the drafting of trench warfare, and the reform was largely frustrated. It just went on like that.

I raised the issue of accommodation charges in 2014. Again, the argument was that the charges would be relatively limited and that there would be no major impact on the seafarers. The companies then started increasing the charges and they got to ludicrous levels. What could the seafarers do? They had no choice over where they were going to sleep at night. They could not hire a separate boat to sleep on. The companies were ripping them off.

I can remember about 40 of us turning up to a Statutory Instrument Committee thinking that we had achieved a major victory—it was wonderful—whereby the minimum wage was going to apply to British waters. We all thought that meant territorial waters, but then

there was a change of definition and we found that it applied only to internal waters—which just about applies to the Norfolk broads, to be honest.

That is what has happened year after year. I have had 20 years of this, so Members will understand my sense of frustration that leads to anger. That is why I think this Bill is a mouse. We will work together to improve it—that is what we will do. We will try to eradicate the loopholes that have been set out by virtually every Member who has spoken so far, including on the number of times a port is used, the way in which measures are enforced and the way in which the surcharge is defined. The Government cannot leave the definition of the surcharge to the harbour authorities. There will be another race to the bottom because they will want to attract companies to use their harbour on the basis that their surcharge is so low. Let us work together as a House to resolve those issues with this mouse of a Bill.

The Bill does not solve the problem of fire and rehire. I was with the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) in Dover. I think she has misunderstood what was going on in the RMT office. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) was receiving a briefing from the RMT that was offered to the Prime Minister and the leaders of other parties as well. I was in the room at the time, and there was no plotting or anything like that. It was about trying to ensure that points were raised in this House so that the Government could act more effectively.

Mrs Elphicke: I have notified the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras that I will be raising this issue. I was in that meeting along with a member of my team. It was very clear that what I was observing was not a conversation with the Labour leader but a conversation led by the Labour leader about what might happen the following week, including some very disparaging references about the Transport Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), whom he sought to embarrass. I appreciate the perspective of the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and I recall him being there.

John McDonnell: We were both in the same room, but I suppose that it is like people witnessing an accident, in that there will be different interpretations. By no means was I calling the leader of the Labour party's conversation an accident—that would be grounds for expulsion.

The Bill does not outlaw fire and rehire. That was used by P&O, whose example was followed very quickly by Heathrow airport in my constituency. If this Bill is the first stage of a reform package, we need to see the rest of it pretty promptly. That means not just introducing minimum wage legislation but looking at the wider exploitation of seafarers, including accommodation charges and safe crew levels. I am really worried. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) mentioned the Herald of Free Enterprise disaster. Time and again, evidence is emerging that the exploitation of seafarers is not just about wages, but about how few seafarers there are on any particular ship and how the training they receive does not guarantee safety. Therefore, we need legislation to be introduced rapidly to ensure that seafarers are not only properly paid but properly trained, and that any ship that sails around our ports has an adequate number of crew on board.

[John McDonnell]

At some stage—this applies to the overall debate as well as to this Bill—we will have to have another discussion about the regulation of the sector. This Bill relates to how it abides by payment of the minimum wage. I do not believe that the concept of harbours levelling the surcharge and then it being implemented or, I suppose, inspected by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency is going to prove effective. That is a division of responsibility and I do not think it will work. As other hon. Members raised earlier, the idea that a ship or company can simply be excluded from operating out of a particular harbour will not prove effective either. We must demonstrate seriousness of purpose, which is why the unions are arguing for detention of the ship when there is a refusal to abide by the measures that are going through in this Bill.

I hope that we will rapidly hear a report on the progress of the seafarers' charter, which I thought would be included in the first legislation that we saw to attack the issues around seafarers and P&O in particular. I would also like to have had some strong evidence of the agreements that are coming forward in the cross-country negotiations taking place on these issues; can we have that in the new year? I also throw in that it is not just about the wages earned week by week, month by month, but about pensions, which are another form of wages. Seafarers' pensions have been eroded over the years and, as a result, it is difficult to attract people to the job because of low pay, lack of pensions, insecurity and, to be frank, unsafe working conditions.

My final point comes back to the Chamber of Shipping. I am angry that, throughout the whole period that these activities have been taking place, when low pay has been inflicted on seafarers and their pensions have been under attack, shipping companies have taken £2 billion in tax relief from tonnage tax—in fact, they have laughed all the way to the bank. The tonnage tax has failed, and it has not produced the jobs that we were promised or encouraged the companies to behave as dutiful employers. I urge the Government to bring forward the whole programme of legislation that was promised as part of the development of the nine-point plan, as well as the seafarers' charter, early in the new year. Unless we have that, there will be no secure employment and the long-term future of the sector will be at considerable risk.

8.2 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to today's debate. It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). I will speak in support of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and raise an important issue about seafarers' pensions. I commend my hon. Friend for her speech and her well-made points. Seafarers working on British vessels and providing services to British ports should be paid at least the minimum wage; I hope that those highly skilled workers, who carry out difficult and dangerous work, would be paid well above that basic minimum.

I take this opportunity to raise an important issue about seafarers being treated properly by their employers. As the House will know, I have been raising the issue of the outstanding £146 million debt owed to the merchant navy ratings pension scheme by P&O Ferries and ultimately

by its parent company DP World. This important issue affects thousands of P&O workers and pensioners as well as seafarers across the maritime industry, who are members of the same industry-wide pension fund.

The sad fact is that, despite repeated requests and years of waiting, DP World has still not paid the money it owes. That is despite the precedent it set by paying debts it owed to the merchant navy officers pension scheme and the precedent P&O Ferries set by making additional voluntary contributions to the merchant navy ratings pension fund before P&O Ferries was taken over by DP World in 2006. To make matters worse, DP World seems to have the money that it owes to the pension scheme, as it spent a similar sum on sponsoring an international golf tournament—in fact, it spent more on the golf tournament, which cost it about £147 million to sponsor.

The debt to the scheme needs to be paid, and pension schemes such as the merchant navy ratings pension fund need to be properly supported. Scheme members and employers deserve to be reassured about their pensions and the future of the scheme. The scheme has about 14,000 members and a large number of employers contribute as well as P&O Ferries. Those employers range from relatively small shipping firms to large Government organisations, including the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and the British Antarctic Survey. Because the merchant navy ratings pension scheme is a “last man standing” pension scheme, other employers could in theory be asked to cover the cost if an employer left the scheme. It would be wrong for there to be a risk, however distant, of the taxpayer or other employers having to pay that unpaid debt.

As we have heard, DP World is taking part in the Government's freeport scheme, so there seems to be a more immediate risk that taxpayers could indirectly subsidise or support an employer that is not fulfilling its obligations. It is important that schemes are protected and treated properly by their members, and confidence in pension schemes needs to be maintained at a high level. I am sure that P&O and DP World do not intend to be seen as the Scrooges of the shipping industry, so I ask them to look into the matter urgently and think again. I hope that they will now provide the funding and financial reassurance needed. They should do the right thing this Christmas for pensioners, workers and fellow employers. I ask the Minister to encourage them and, if necessary, to take further action to ensure that they do that.

8.6 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I appreciate being given the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I declare an interest as a proud member of the RMT parliamentary group, and I support the maritime sector and our seafarers, as well as those involved in the dispute in the rail sector with Network Rail and the train operating companies.

I was present in the House when the actions of P&O became apparent on St Patrick's day. Those actions represent the lowest point in industrial relations in this country for many years. There are some parallels with Tiny Rowland, the unacceptable face of capitalism, and some of the excesses that went on with the asset stripping of Michael Slade and others, but this is about as low as it gets.

I was buoyed up by the response from Ministers, including the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), the former shipping Minister, who was incandescent. I was under the impression that the will in the House and the country was such that measures would quickly be brought before the House to take P&O Ferries to task—to fine it and to take appropriate action against its chief executive. The chief executive was arrogant and flippant in his presentation to the joint session of the Transport Committee and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee; he was almost boastful that he had not consulted with the unions and had broken the law. I am therefore disappointed that it has taken nine months—we are now in December; it is almost January—to have a Bill intended to address the issues. I will support the Bill, but I have reservations and I hope that it is possible to improve it in Committee or even on Report.

Certainly, the Government cannot claim that the issue came as a bolt from the blue, because the unions, particularly the RMT, warned them about it in 2020 when an order was introduced to extend the national minimum wage to seafarers in UK territorial waters. It then warned them again in 2021 when there were issues with Irish Ferries, which was operating services between Dover and Calais and undercutting P&O and DFDS. I will outline some of my concerns with the Bill, in the hope that we can secure the best deal for seafarers, which is an outcome that I hope hon. Members on both sides of the House want to see.

Successive Governments have convened legal working groups on seafarers and the national minimum wage. I think the first was in 2009. We have a major problem with seafarer care that the minimum wage alone cannot address. We were promised a review of the Equality Act 2010 regulations, but that has not happened, which is a major failure in the Government's seafarer policy. The powers in the Bill to make secondary regulations disguise the complexity and the narrowness of the legislation. I ask the Minister: will the UK national minimum wage age bands apply to the national minimum wage equivalence declaration? P&O, of course, dismissed apprentices, as well as hundreds of directly employed seafarers, but does the Minister consider a £4.81 hourly rate for apprentice seafarers fair? The Maritime Skills Commission's ratings review, which is extremely welcome, should look at this aspect of the Bill, but it is vital to avoid putting in place any more barriers to training more ratings in the UK.

As well as training, the Government must facilitate employment opportunities. I fully understand the sentiments expressed by hon. Friends who represent ports where there are opportunities, particularly for young people to have a career at sea, but the Government have a role in ensuring that those jobs are not taken by agency workers from overseas.

When the Bill was in the other place, the noble Lord Henty discussed the lack of national minimum wage protection for crew working in the offshore wind and offshore renewable supply chain beyond the UK territorial waters limit. Crew working on vessels servicing the offshore oil and gas industry across the UK continental shelf are entitled to protection under national minimum wage legislation, but crew working on offshore wind farms in the UK exclusive economic zone—sometimes on the same ships—are not. That is unfair, and it leads to serious exploitation.

There is exclusion of UK seafarers from a growing labour market directly linked to the UK economy. It is incredible: there will be 100,000 new jobs in the North sea, but young men and women from the coastal communities will not have the opportunity to take up those positions. Those jobs, and that market, are funded by the UK taxpayer. Also, operators should be prohibited from deducting accommodation costs. My colleagues have already mentioned how much Irish Ferries and P&O were deducting.

Rosters have been mentioned. The Bill recognises to a certain extent that national minimum wage avoidance is a problem in the UK shipping industry, but it does not fully cover wider employment rights issues, such as the hours and roster patterns that seafarers work; neither do the raft of secondary powers that the Bill creates. On Report in the other place, the Minister openly stated that the Government are not seeking to influence roster patterns—I believe that the Secretary of State said the same thing today—or any other employment conditions through the Bill. To give this legislation a greater chance of successfully countering the actions of P&O, Irish Ferries and others who are trashing UK seafarer jobs and the maritime skills base in order to increase their profits, the seafarers' charter should be put in the Bill.

On the seafarers' charter, we really need a maximum roster pattern of two weeks on, two weeks off, in the ferry sector. I urge the Minister to work with the Labour party and the trade unions on the Bill, and on the seafarers' charter, so that we get this right, restore jobs, get fair pay agreements, and start training programmes in the ferry sector. Members have pointed out that P&O is making bigger savings from its changes to roster patterns than it was from having rates of pay that were below the national minimum wage.

In the other place, the Government rejected the previously agreed roster pattern in the charter. It is commissioning further research on roster patterns and crewing levels. That is despite a collectively agreed standard being in place in Stena Line and DFDS. I refer the Minister to Cardiff University's crew fatigue study for P&O in 2012, the EU Horizon 2020 project, and the World Maritime University's EVREST report. All that evidence has been shared with the Government. I am surprised and disappointed that the Government have not taken action to tackle low-cost operators, particularly in view of the issues of crew fatigue and safety.

Others have raised the issues of port-hopping and avoidance techniques. I asked the Secretary of State about that when he appeared before the Transport Committee. The criteria are too loose; we need to have a look at that. Port-hopping remains a genuine avoidance technique, and it becomes easier to use the more frequently a vessel calls at harbour. I support the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and Nautilus International in specifying that the threshold in the Bill should be 52 calls at a harbour per year per vessel, rather than the 120 that the Government suggest.

In conclusion, the Bill is an opportunity to mandate better pay and employment standards, to restore the principle of collective bargaining conditions at P&O and across the ferry sector, and to ensure fair pay and safe, decent employment conditions for decent, hard-working seafarers. The Bill's scope must be widened to tackle avoidance techniques, and to help to standardise

[Grahame Morris]

fair pay and collective conditions, starting in the ferry sector. I hope that the Minister will address the concerns that I have raised, and ensure the best possible deal for seafarers.

8.16 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I say how pleased I am to have heard the comments of right hon. and hon. Members? In particular, it was a real pleasure to follow the forensic contribution of the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris); he has a vast wealth of knowledge on this subject. I thank him for sharing it with all of us in the Chamber; it was good to have those points strongly reinforced.

I warmly welcome the Bill. It makes complete sense that those who spend a considerable amount of time in British ports should be paid at least the minimum British wage—indeed, they should be paid more. In my constituency, there are many seafarers and fishermen from the Philippines; they spend a lot of time in Portavogie. It is not only morally correct but our responsibility to ensure that those seafarers are looked after financially.

The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) outlined his case very clearly; unfortunately, he has had to do so over a great number of years. As he said, every time he thought an agreement was reached, another obstacle—another reason for saying no—was found. How frustrating that must be! Our hope is that this legislation will be the start of something firm, strong and final that gives the reassurance and the protection that the seafarers want. He also referred to fire and rehire. I wholeheartedly endorse what he said on that, as others have done. Perhaps the Bill could deal with that issue. If it could, then we will have achieved something above and beyond what we hoped for. It would be good to have provisions in place to deal with that.

The issues surrounding P&O Ferries have proven instrumental to the fishing and trading industry. I echo what has been said about P&O. I am outraged by how people wearing balaclavas strong-armed and man-handled the workers off the P&O boats. I watched that, that day; it was the same in Larne harbour as in other places. There was something totally wrong, outrageous and disgraceful about it in a democratic country—a country of freedom, where we stand up for the rights of others. We watched what was happening on TV, and we could do nothing about it. I hope that the legislation will be strong and firm, and will give the protection that is necessary.

A combined number of 800 staff, including in Northern Ireland, were made redundant at start of the year, in addition to a £100 million loss year on year. P&O stated that the business is not viable in its current state. P&O's chief executive officer stated that the average hourly rate for agency workers under the crewing model would be £5.50, yet the minimum wage in the United Kingdom is higher than that for those 18 and over.

I read the comparisons by the International Labour Organisation—for *Hansard* it is important to put this on the record. It stated that the recommended basic wage for an able seaman is \$648, around £550 per month, based on seafarers working eight hours a day, or a 48-hour working week. That equates to around £2.66 an

hour. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) has quoted that figure in this House on numerous occasions, and it is disgraceful that that should be the wage for people on the international seas. I know that control over what we do in British waters is with the Minister in the House, but we are all outraged by that sort of wage for seafarers across the world. Such a wage is unheard of, and impossible for those working to live on. The Government must step in and ensure that seafarers are rewarded for their work in British ports—I think the Minister has given that commitment, but we want to see a bit more strength in that if we can.

I hope that the Bill will pass, because if it does, harbour authorities will have the power to request ship operators covered by the Bill to declare that their seafarers are paid at a rate at least equivalent to the national minimum wage for their work in the UK or its territorial waters. In addition, as the Minister said earlier, harbour authorities can refuse access to the harbours if operators fail to pay the surcharge and the additional payment. Those are the sorts of penalties I wish to see in law, and like others, I wish to see stronger, firmer laws and greater protection and penalties. We should hit these people in their pockets, and that will have an effect because they are very much money orientated.

I commend Relate NI—this is a different issue, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it is linked to seafarers so I wanted to put it on record. It is working with the Seafarers' Charity to provide free counselling for current and retired seafarers, fishermen, and anyone who works with them. It provides finance and counselling or advice about isolation due to being out at sea or homesickness. It provides six fully funded sessions for seafarers, their dependants, children and wider families, which is incredible support for those who are based at sea and possibly not earning much money. We all recognise the good work that Relate NI does, and I wanted to put that on the record in the House and thank it for all that it does and for stepping up.

In conclusion, there is more we can do to ensure that seafarers working in British ports a certain number of times each year are properly paid. This debate is all about that. This is about protection and a Bill that makes a difference. It is about ensuring that people want to be seafarers and have that as a vocation or job that will give them great confidence for the future. It is not possible, and more importantly it is not fair, for staff to be so severely underpaid for the decent work they do. One old saying, which I think is important, is “a fair day's wage for a fair day's work” and that is what we want from the Bill. I look to the Minister to give us that reassurance, and I welcome the Bill. This is a giant step in the right direction, but as others have said, particularly the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington, we want the Bill to have teeth, because with those teeth comes protection, which is what this debate is all about.

8.23 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Today represents the 41st anniversary of the Penlee disaster when eight brave members of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution set out on a stormy night off the coast of Cornwall to rescue the crew of the *Union Star*. Having rescued four of them, another 16 were lost at sea. Today we remember the pain of that community in the south-west, and the bravery that those people show on a daily basis.

The maritime sector is responsible for transporting 90% of global trade and supplying the world with food, fuel, medicines and goods. The world's 1.9 million seafarers are key workers. We as a nation ask a lot of them, and they do not let us down, as has been pointed out tonight, particularly during the pandemic. We owe our mariners and seafarers the most protection, and I use the word "protection" deliberately. We must protect their rights as workers, protect their pay and conditions, and protect their future.

We have seen what happens when bad bosses go rogue. We are a proud seafaring nation that was once the envy of the world. How could a Dubai-owned company, which was given millions of pounds of taxpayers' money by this Government during the pandemic, sack 800 staff and seemingly get away with it? It has got away with it. It knew we have a weak Government, who might talk a good game—after all, at the time both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Transport said that the company would be criminally investigated and sanctioned. But that has not happened.

Peter Hebblethwaite, who was described by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) as the world's worst boss—I have noticed it is a crowded field—cynically trampled on workers' rights, and has gone unpunished and faced zero consequences. When P&O pulled the rug out from underneath its staff, and sacked them illegally over a pre-recorded Zoom call, I can honestly say that never in my political life had I seen such blatant abuse of workers' rights at such a scale. That must not happen again. The Bill is supposed to strengthen protections for workers, and we will work with the Government to set out what the Bill can do. My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State said that the Bill does not address the situation that happened with P&O, so let us not fool ourselves. Until we start with criminal liabilities, and hike them up, as well as protection against criminal negligence, such companies will continue, and are continuing, to get away with it.

First, we will press for a reduction in the number of port visits to UK ports from 120 to 52 times a year. We will amend the legislation to ensure that HMRC's involvement is stronger, and that its role is clear when it comes to ensuring that bad bosses comply with the minimum wage. We ask that the Bill ensures that fines are mandated for non-compliance with the national minimum wage, and that they are punitive enough to act as a deterrent. We will ask in Committee that if directors of those companies fail to pay the national minimum wage, they should be found criminally responsible. Our amendments, if accepted by the Government, will ensure that port operators are not their own authorities and are not marking their homework. There must be firm guidance on surcharges, and the Secretary of State should be responsible for establishing a method for collecting those fines. We cannot give ultimate power to port operators—bear in mind that P&O operates a port, and it is inconceivable that it would potentially be responsible for fining itself and its business competitors at the same time. We know that bad bosses will exploit any gaps in the Bill, and it is incumbent on us to ensure that a third party collects the fines, not individual port authorities.

We have had a full and thorough debate, and I thank hon. Members who have, towards the end of the year, turned up to participate in it. First, I thank the Chair of

the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), who said that the Bill is not the whole solution to the problem. He is absolutely right. I hope that, some time after the Bill has passed, his Select Committee will take it away and reflect on how successful it has been. The hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) is a doughty champion for the docks in her constituency, and she was exactly right to say that P&O's action was a disgusting act of industrial vandalism. I note further that her council has been declared bankrupt tonight, so I wish it all the best and hope that it can come through its current problems.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) is another doughty campaigner who, in a tour de force, eloquently described the working conditions that these workers now face, with weeks and weeks at sea, on for 12 hours a day, seven days a week. He is right that the Bill needs improving.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for being the Minister through such turbulent times for both aviation and maritime. He put in a shift—in my opinion, on some days there is no fairness in politics. He said that P&O's actions did not appeal to a British sense of fairness. I would say that they could not have happened in any country with proper employment laws. That is what really needs to change if we want to make progress.

My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) talked about morality. I rarely go into morality in politics because there is rarely a black-or-white day in this business, but he described P&O's action as immoral—it was—and the Bill as a missed opportunity.

The hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) started well, and I am sympathetic to the crisis in her coastal community. However, she strayed into errant Whips' lines. She kept saying that Labour Front-Bench Members were silent on something, but she did not say what that was. I am happy to give way if she wants to tell me what we are silent on. On her criticism of unions, as a fellow traveller of faith, I will lend her my copy of Pope Leo XIII's 1892 encyclical "Rerum Novarum", which stood up for the rights of trade unions to organise. Labour Members will always stand up for that right.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) took us down a Netflix line for a while. He said that seafarers get poverty pay. It is poverty pay, but it is worse than that, because people now cannot get into these jobs. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) made a great speech. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said that the legislation is like a mouse. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) said that DP World's pension deficit is the same as the amount it spent on a golf tournament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) talked about a bright future for our coastal communities and how those jobs that could have been the future of those communities now cannot be accessed. Labour will work constructively with the Government to strengthen the Bill by closing the loopholes that we know bad bosses will exploit and to ensure that our seafarers are protected.

8.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): I thank hon. Members for all their contributions and join the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) in commemorating, 41 years on, the memory and service of the eight RNLI lifeboatmen from Mousehole who operated the Penlee lifeboat.

I think that everyone in the Chamber agrees with my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who put it bluntly by saying that all of us, especially at this time of year, are reliant on those who operate our ports and bring everything into our country. Ninety-five per cent of all of our trade travels by boat, and a lot of that comes into her constituency. That is why it is so important to all of us that we see the Bill progress.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Witney (Robert Courts) and for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) and, across the political divide, the hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) and for Easington (Grahame Morris), who all made the point that everyone in the House was shocked by the behaviour of P&O earlier this year, and they have come together in wanting to do something about it. It was particularly gratifying to see both the Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) supporting the legislation and wanting to see good standards and raised standards not only through the Bill but through the Government's nine-point plan.

I am glad that those on the Opposition Front Bench broadly welcome the Bill, as do the SNP representatives. I just point out to the SNP Front Bench that the RMT did meet my hon. Friends in the Department on Thursday. We are always happy to engage with unions and anybody else who is interested in bringing things to a head in that regard.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) was also very kind to praise the Government for dragging the French to start looking at issues in this space. I am glad that he is supporting those of us on the Government Benches who are leading our European partners forward on legislation in this space. More broadly, I am delighted that everyone across the House is supporting where we are going, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), whose voice it is always a pleasure to hear.

I think we can all agree that the Bill is not a silver bullet, but it is a starting point, as my hon. Friend the Member for Witney said. I pay tribute to previous Ministers, including him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) who brought it forward. I look forward to picking up on many of the issues raised at later stages if I cannot address them at the Dispatch Box today.

I want to turn first to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), the Chair of the Transport Committee, who raised three points. First, on the International Labour Organisation, the measures in the Bill will be stronger than what it has brought forward. They are compatible with the ILO, but they will be stronger than what it has as a baseline. On which is the best body—the harbour authorities or the Maritime and Coastguard Agency—the MCA will have the power to investigate and prosecute offences under the Bill. It is responsible for the enforcement role, although port

operators will collect the moneys. He made another important point on minimum wage corridors. We are looking at that across the piece at the moment. I mentioned France, but we are looking at other European counterparts for where we can have routes to really drive forward standards for workers across the country.

John McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Holden: I have only eight minutes, but I will give way once.

John McDonnell: Will the Minister write to us with some form of timetable on the agreements and when they will be ready?

Mr Holden: I would be delighted to update the right hon. Gentleman at a future point. We can perhaps go into that further in Committee. If he raises it at that point, we can perhaps take it further from there.

Those were the three points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South. I want to touch on a few more points.

One main point was the concern, expressed by many hon. Members including the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), about the potential for port hopping. The key thing is that the Secretary of State has the power to direct anybody who is trying to abuse the system.

On the civil investigation and the ongoing matters mentioned by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) relating to P&O, I think we can all agree about Mr Hebblethwaite—the way that he has treated his workers is totally unacceptable. Given the ongoing civil action, it would be inappropriate for the Government to comment at this time. However, after that point I will be happy to comment further.

I want to draw Members' attention to the broader issue regarding the Government's nine-point plan. My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock made a point about global standards, which was picked up by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord). We want to see them leading the world with the highest standards possible.

The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), my hon. Friends the Members for Thurrock and for Dover, the hon. Member for Easington and my hon. Friend the Member for Witney all mentioned training and quality. They are part of the seafarers' charter, which we want to see driven further forward.

On rostering, an important point mentioned by the hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull East and for Weaver Vale, and my County Durham neighbour the hon. Member for Easington, we have commissioned an independent assessment of rostering and I look forward to its conclusions.

Offshore wind was mentioned by several hon. Members, including Members from Scotland. Under article 2 of the National Minimum Wage (Offshore Employment) Order, on working in connection with the exploration of the sea or subsoil, basically if you are in the UK's exclusive economic zone, there is a difference between that and the continental shelf. I look forward to further debate on that in Committee. It is a technical area, which is worth us looking at further.

The Bill marks great progress on the Government's nine-point plan. It is a step forward, delivering a suite of measures to improve seafarers' protections and welfare. It is not a silver bullet and will not solve every problem, but it will incentivise operators to pay fair wages, particularly for those with the closest ties to the UK, and recognise the pivotal role that they play in the movement of the UK's goods and services. It will drive best practice.

Beyond the Bill, the UK will continue to be a leading voice on the international stage as the home of the International Maritime Organisation. That proximity will help us to work more closely with counterparts across the seas in driving forward better standards, as we have already seen from the reaction of France, Denmark, Belgium and other continental neighbours. We will continue to make progress on the rest of the nine-point plan and will work with our international partners to ensure a fairer deal for seafarers.

I wish you a merry Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I shall save my merry Christmases for the rest of the House until tomorrow evening when I reply to the Adjournment debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

SEAFARERS' WAGES BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Seafarers' Wages Bill [Lords]:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 17 January 2023.

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

Consideration and Third Reading

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

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

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

Other proceedings

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

Question agreed to.

SEAFARERS' WAGES BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Seafarers' Wages Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

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

- (2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

NHS Dentistry: Salford and Eccles

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

8.41 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The British Dental Association states that NHS dentistry is facing an existential threat. It says that the threat predates the pandemic, when only enough dentistry for about half the population of England was commissioned. Access to NHS dental services was already very poor in many parts of the country, but access problems have now reached an unprecedented scale, with existing deep inequalities in access and outcomes set to widen. Sadly, nowhere are those access problems more acutely felt than in my constituency of Salford and Eccles. I have been receiving unprecedented levels of casework from people who simply cannot access an NHS dentist.

One constituent works night shifts on minimum wage. She had required urgent root canal treatment for some time but could not find an NHS dentist and could not even contemplate the cost of a private dentist, so, like millions across the country, she struggled on. The problem is now so severe that her tooth is beyond saving with root canal treatment. She is having to consider having it removed, which she is told will cost her several hundred pounds. She has not got several hundred pounds. She does not know where to turn.

Another constituent, who is also on a low income, had been trying to find an NHS dentist for over two years. They had two broken teeth and other dental issues that they could not afford to have treated privately, so they called the emergency dentist helpline. The helpline advised them to go for private treatment. Now, at only 21 years of age, my constituent cannot afford any dental treatment at all, and they fear that they will end up losing their teeth.

Another constituent, who is registered with a disability and who works full-time for the NHS on low pay, tried as far as Rochdale and Oldham but eventually had to pay £250 for a private tooth removal that left her with little money to live on until her next pay cheque.

To assess the severity of the situation, my office rang every single dental practice listed on the NHS website as falling within my constituency, to inquire if they were accepting new adult NHS patients. Every single one said no, and only two said that they were taking on new NHS child patients. What is worse, when I raised that very issue with the Government back in October 2021, I was informed that they had not made an assessment of the numbers of people refused NHS dental treatment, nor did they hold any waiting list data at all on access to NHS dental services in Salford or Greater Manchester. Not even to be aware of the scale of the problem is, in itself, somewhat staggering.

As I am sure the Minister is aware, this is not just a Salford problem, but a national one. Researchers for the BBC documentary “Disappearing Dentists”, which aired in August, attempted to call every one of the dental practices in the UK that holds an NHS contract. Of the 26 dental practices with NHS contracts across Salford, 96% were not taking new adult NHS patients, and UK-wide, 90% of practices were not taking new adult NHS patients.

I must pay full credit to the local staff and teams across Salford: all the dentists, hygienists, therapists, nurses and administrators, and the Greater Manchester integrated care partnership’s dental commissioning team. They are giving their absolute best in incredibly difficult circumstances. However, our dental services are under unprecedented strain.

I would be grateful if the Minister addressed the following issues in his response. First, there has been chronic underfunding of NHS dental services. In real terms, net Government spend on general dental practice in England was cut by over a quarter between 2010 and 2020. It is also important to note that England invests significantly less in dental services per head of population than other parts of the UK. For example, before the pandemic Government spend on NHS dentistry per capita was £37 in England, compared with £49 in Wales, £56 in Northern Ireland and £59 in Scotland. The Minister might respond by saying that in January the Government pledged £50 million for a “dentistry treatment blitz”. However, that was a time-limited, one-off injection of funding which had very modest take-up, as practices were so overstretched in trying to hit unrealistic activity targets that they struggled to find any additional capacity. The British Dental Association estimates that it would take £1.5 billion a year just to restore dental budgets to their 2010 levels. I hope that the Minister will agree to take back a proposal to his Department for the ringfencing of long-term funding on that scale.

Secondly, the current target-based NHS dental contract is causing serious problems in the recruitment and retention of staff. The British Dental Association says that we are facing an “exodus” of dentists from the service: 75% of dentists surveyed are thinking of reducing their NHS commitments next year alone. Central to this is not only the issue of chronic underfunding that I have already mentioned, but the current discredited target-based dental contract that was imposed on the profession in 2006 and was widely considered unsustainable and unfit for purpose even before the pandemic. Indeed, in 2010 both Labour and the Conservatives committed to amending the contract. It sets restrictions on the number of NHS patients that a dentist can see, and it punishes dentists for taking on new patients with high needs.

The Minister may, of course, refer to a package of marginal changes that the Government introduced in November, including dentists’ updating a “find a dentist” website regularly with details of the availability of appointments, a higher reward for treating three or more teeth, and a new payment rate for complex treatment. While those are of course welcome changes, sadly there is little point in setting up a “find a dentist” website for appointments when the Government know that no appointments are actually available.

Furthermore, the British Dental Association states that the changes will do little to arrest the exodus of dentists from the service or to address the crisis in patient access, given that they have been introduced with no additional funding. With that in mind, I would be grateful if the Minister told me when formal negotiations on fundamental long-term reform of the dental contract are due to begin.

A constituent contacted me to express concern about the Government’s plan to go ahead with proposed changes pursuant to the recent consultation on changes

to the General Dental Council's international registration legislation despite the large number of respondents who have raised issues relating to the proposal. I hope that the Minister will take those concerns on board, and will agree to review it.

Thirdly, let me stress to the Minister that NHS dentistry must cease to be treated as an afterthought in healthcare policymaking. Changes in primary care commissioning in the Health and Care Act 2022 must not lead to further cuts, and dental services must be represented adequately in the governance structures of the new integrated care systems.

Let me finally point out that prevention is key, but has lost its way somewhat in recent years. The Government must undertake to build on historical commitments to prevention, in parallel with support for dental services. That must include supervised brushing in early years settings, dedicated funding for new water fluoridation schemes, and measures to reduce sugar consumption.

I hope that the Minister has listened to the concerns I have raised and will address each point in turn, rather than reiterating previous Government responses on what they have done so far. What the Government have done so far clearly is not working. If my constituents cannot get access to an NHS dentist across Salford and Eccles, something needs to change urgently. Access to dental treatment should be a right, not a luxury.

As I set out at the start, NHS dentistry faces an existential threat. My constituents are not receiving the access to care that they deserve. It is clear that urgent action is required. Finally, let me take this opportunity to wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, a fantastic Christmas and a happy New Year, and the same to the Minister and all staff in the House.

8.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): Let me start by congratulating the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) on securing this important debate. I share her frustration and am aware that some areas in the country face serious difficulties with access to NHS dental care. She used some powerful examples, which are exactly the kinds of things that we are trying to fix.

As we recover from the pandemic, activity is going back up again and we want it to go up faster. Dentistry is an important part of the NHS. We are committed to addressing the challenges that NHS dentistry faces in some parts of the country. We are continuing to take important steps to improve access for patients. There are variations around the country, which was already an issue before the pandemic.

The specific risks from covid in dentistry, for obvious reasons given the nature of the treatment—looking down people's throats and breathing in the same air—resulted in the need to reduce the amount of care that could be delivered, in line with infection prevention and control measures to keep patients and the workforce safe. The pandemic placed further pressure on the system. However, NHS dentistry provision has been increasing gradually and safely. I am pleased to say that NHS England asked all dental practices to return to 100% of their contracted activity in July this year. Many practices are already delivering at that level and, in some cases, beyond. I will go on to talk about delivering beyond.

To support the industry during this testing time, we took unprecedented action and provided over £1.7 billion in income protection, to ensure that NHS dentist capacity was retained and services were provided and available after the pandemic. We made an additional £50 million available for NHS dental services at the end of last year, to increase capacity in NHS dental teams. Appointments were given to those in most urgent need of dental treatment, including vulnerable groups and children. As a result of that funding, I am pleased to say that an additional 1,110 patients were seen in Salford. To support the provision of urgent care, more than 170 urgent dental care centres remain open across the country. One of those centres is in the Salford locality, as the hon. Lady knows.

Across the nation, the system is recovering and delivery of dental care is increasing. In 2021-22, 24,272 dentists performed NHS activity—an increase of 539 on the previous year. In the 12 months to 30 June this year, 5.6 million children were seen by an NHS dentist, compared with 3.9 million children in the same period the previous year. That represents a 43% increase.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): There have been reports in a number of our constituencies of almost a dental health epidemic. Can the Minister explain whether there will be targeted resources for a number of our constituencies where there is such a high level of child dental ill health?

Neil O'Brien: I am exploring how we can best target the places with the most acute problems. There are problems in a lot of different places, and we are thinking about that actively at the moment. I will come back to that as I make progress.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that if he wanted to intervene, he ought to have been here right at the beginning, because it is the hon. Lady's Adjournment debate, and it is about Salford and Eccles? I leave it to him to decide whether he wishes to intervene.

Neil O'Brien: I am happy to take whatever interventions are appropriate.

We know that there are still further improvements to be made. Although I am pleased that over 75% of the patients who tried to get a dental appointment over the last two years were successful, this is not back to the level that we were seeing pre-pandemic, which was 92%. That is why in July and in our plan for patients, which the hon. Lady mentioned, we announced some improvements to the 2006 contract to ensure that patient access was improved, although I want to reassure her that we do not regard those as the end of the story; they were a stepping stone.

Those changes included: making sure that dentists were remunerated more fairly for complex work, which will improve access for patients; implementing a minimum value of £23 for each unit of dental activity, boosting incomes in the places where the UDA value is lowest; and enabling dental practices to deliver up to 110% of their contract levels, to increase activity and allow those

[Neil O'Brien]

practices that are delivering NHS care most effectively to deliver more. This effectively takes away the cap that has been in place since the 2006 contract, which the hon. Lady mentioned.

This package will increase and improve access to dental care for patients across the country. We have already taken action to implement these changes, including through regulations that came into effect on 25 November. The changes have all been decided with careful consideration, working collaboratively with the dental sector. The Department has worked with the General Dental Council on legislative proposals that will make registration processes for dental professionals qualified outside the UK more proportionate and streamlined, making the process to join the UK workforce more efficient for dentists from overseas. These changes are another way in which we are seeking to improve access for patients.

Finally, to make it easier for patients to find dentists taking on new patients, we have made it a requirement for NHS dentists to update their information on the NHS website, which has historically been out of date, but of course we are looking to go further to ensure that those appointments are there. These changes are just the beginning. They are the necessary first steps of our work to improve NHS dentistry. These are the measures that we can take immediately, and they will have a noticeable impact, but we will go further.

Looking forward into the new year, we have been working with NHS England and the sector on further changes to improve access. Our priorities for this next

phase of reform include: improved access to urgent care for patients who need to see someone immediately; better access to care for new patients; and further workforce and payment reform. We aim to take the necessary steps to implement these changes next year, but I am keen to seek every opportunity to take action wherever I can, and ahead of those reforms we are also actively considering what support we can offer to help patients who do not currently have access to the dental system and those who are not attached to a practice, who have the worst access. We are also considering how the recruitment and retention of dentists can be improved, particularly in the parts of the country where the need is greater. We are also thinking further about how overseas qualified dentists can be supported to start working in the NHS more quickly.

I am strongly committed to improving our NHS dental system wherever I can for all those who need it. The hon. Lady has set out a powerful case today on why we need to go further, and we will go further. I thank her for raising this important debate, and I hope that she will be reassured that although the reforms we have made so far will make a difference, they are far from being the end of the story, and that we will continue to take action to improve access to NHS dentistry across the nation.

Question put and agreed to.

8.57 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 19 December 2022

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

Child Bed Poverty

[*Relevant document: e-petition 604509, Create a 'National Sleep Strategy' to end child bed poverty.*]

4.30 pm

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Welcome to today's debate. Before we start, I remind colleagues that it is a 90-minute debate. I think it was advertised as being slightly longer.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 604509, relating to child bed poverty.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Paisley. The petition asks the Government to bring an end to child bed poverty by creating a national sleep strategy. It states:

"Bed poverty is affecting educational outcomes for children across the UK

A national sleep strategy must resource local authorities to identify, address and ultimately end bed poverty".

When I was presented with the title of the petition, as part of the Petition Committee's normal deliberations, I was frankly shocked. I could not help but question how bed poverty could be a thing in our country, but after listening to the petitioner and taking evidence on the issue, it evidently, and shockingly, is. Here we are, just days away from Christmas, and it is utterly depressing that some children will be saying to themselves, "All I want for Christmas is a safe place to sleep."

I express my admiration for the creator of the petition, Bex Wilson. As well as being a hard-working deputy headteacher, Bex has founded her own charity, Zarach, which provides beds for children living in poverty in the Leeds area. I congratulate Bex on the recent arrival of a healthy baby girl, Viola. I also thank Buttle UK, End Furniture Poverty, the Sleep Charity, Orange Box North East and a number of parents with lived experience of bed poverty for sharing their insights and experience with me ahead of the debate.

It is a distressing and shameful truth that in this country child poverty has become a pervasive issue. More children than at any other point in the last decade are growing up in households that are unable to meet their most basic needs. The latest available figures suggest that in 2021 3.9 million children across the UK were living in poverty. Since then, uplifts to universal credit and local housing allowance have been scrapped, inflation has reached heights not seen in 40 years, and an absence of support has pushed millions more families into desperate circumstances.

To those who work on the frontline of crisis services, it is undeniable that the figure of 3.9 million has been dwarfed by reality, but child poverty is more than just a statistic; it is a painful, grinding experience for each child living through it. It means growing up in stressful households, going without the same educational and

development opportunities as their peers, going to school hungry or spending their evenings in a cold and damp home. For many children, it means not having a safe space to sleep at night.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): In my constituency, the Batley & Birstall Excellence in Schools Together group of 21 schools across Batley and Birstall has identified at least 163 of its pupils who do not sleep in their own bed. They either share with their siblings or sleep on sofas or on the floor, which has a severe impact on their educational attainment, development and family life. Charities such as Zarach are incredible at providing beds for children in need, including in my constituency, but does my hon. Friend agree that those depressing statistics are a sad reflection of the poverty in our communities, and that the Government must step up to help those families and provide local authorities with the funding that they need to eliminate child bed poverty?

Catherine McKinnell: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend said. The fact that she has that statistic is progress in itself, because one of the big challenges is that we do not know the level of this form of poverty. It is a hidden truth that many households simply cannot afford to provide each child with a bed of their own. On speaking to families with the lived experience of bed poverty, I heard some utterly heartbreaking stories: children sleeping on infested sofa cushions because the only alternative was a wooden floor, which we know would not provide support for their growing bodies; children sharing a bed with their siblings, as my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) said, none of whom have privacy or can expect a night of undisturbed sleep; and children sleeping in a bath because it was the only safe space for them to rest. With all the resources, opportunities and potential that we have in this country, I cannot believe that that is the start in life that the Government think should be given to our children.

Part of the problem, as I have mentioned, is that there are no official figures that I can share with Members to convey the scale of the problem. In 2018, Buttle UK estimated that around 400,000 children were going to sleep without a bed of their own. That was in 2018, so we know that that figure is wholly unrepresentative of the crisis that many families face today. The ongoing economic tumult has already left households struggling to put food on their plates and heat their homes. When the cost of furniture has increased by 42% since 2010, the prospect of buying a bed for every child is simply out of reach for some parents. Rising financial hardship has combined with a plethora of concerning trends to make the issue of bed poverty, which has come to the attention of schoolteachers, particularly acute.

Sadly, the covid-19 pandemic saw a rise in cases of domestic violence. As the increased number of mainly women fled abusive partners, they were left with nothing but their children, and a suitcase of clothes if they were lucky—no furniture and no money to buy it with. Buttle UK has identified the pandemic as generating a sharp rise in need. Within the first year, demand for its grants increased by 70%, and the amount spent on beds almost tripled.

Our country also faces a housing crisis in which the most disadvantaged are particularly vulnerable. Families are moving to unfurnished homes to try to save some

[Catherine McKinnell]

rent just so that they can keep a roof over their heads, but the idea that they can then secure beds—big, bulky items—and new mattresses for each member of the household and get them to an unfurnished property is out of reach. Social housing rarely comes furnished.

End Furniture Poverty found that just 2% of social homes include some form of furnishing compared with 29% of private rented properties. Given that the purpose of social housing is to accommodate the most vulnerable in our society, it seems the crisis of bed poverty, although shocking on the surface, is inevitable.

The scale of bed poverty is really concerning when we consider how corrosive it is to a child's life. For all of us here, getting into our bed at the end of a long day is utter relief and second nature—something we take completely for granted and that we could not imagine going without. So it will come as no surprise when I say that growing up in bed poverty has lifelong consequences. At the most fundamental level, a bed is a safe space for a child. It offers warmth, independence, privacy and comfort, and it is especially important in high stress households, which we know, when someone experiences poverty, is how it can be.

A bed also provides a social function—a place for children to have sleepovers and build their friendships at school. If that bed is taken away, a child is further exposed to the anguish and solitude that growing up in poverty can bring. Going without a comfortable space to rest also leaves a child unable to sleep properly.

As a mother of three, I know how irritable children can be when they miss a good night's sleep, but the effect of sleep deprivation on a child's wellbeing is far more detrimental than just a day of being a bit grouchy. From low moods to persistent feelings of helplessness and isolation, the mental health impact of bed poverty is something that no young person should ever experience. Parents can see that pain in their child. One mum told Buttle UK's Chances for Children campaign that her children were

“angry and irritable and the two of them would argue all the time because they were so tired. Both are bright and their schoolwork suffered. They were constantly late for school”,

and one

“started to take time off because he was so exhausted. His mood suffered and he started to get depressed.”

I also spoke to one mother who had experienced bed poverty and was so grateful for the help that she received. After she received the bed, sheets and pyjamas from a charity, she described her child as becoming a different person overnight. It was powerful to hear about that experience. Those parents share their experiences, no matter how hard it is or how difficult it is to admit that they found themselves in that situation, because they do not want any child to go through that experience.

The importance of sleep does not stop at emotional regulation. It is important for many physical and neurological processes that allow children to function and grow in everyday life. It is important for brain reorganisation, and it helps children to focus and process thoughts throughout the day. Sleep is when hormones are balanced, blood pressure lowered, the immune system regulated and illnesses fought. It has even been associated with a reduction in the risk of obesity and type 2

diabetes. All the way down to the very smallest levels, a child's cells and body systems perform vital jobs during the stages of sleep. Michael Farquhar, an NHS consultant in children's sleep medicine, stated:

“I describe sleep as like getting an MOT every night for your brain and body...the longer you leave it the more problems it causes.”

With the short-term challenges of sleep deprivation come the lifelong consequences of bed poverty. Research has shown that pupils who get more sleep perform better at maths, science and reading—markers of educational attainment that the Government tell us are vital for securing good jobs in the future. That is because sleep helps children to solve problems, develop their memory and learn effectively. How many times do we go to bed on a problem and wake up with it solved? That is the power of sleep. How can we expect a child to concentrate throughout a day of education if their night was spent on a cold, hard floor, or in a bath? That was a question Bex put to me after explaining the backstory of her charity, Zarach. After discovering that one of her pupils was living in a home without a bed, the difficulties that she encountered in teaching conjugated verbs made more sense.

Education has the power to improve opportunities and give young people the ability to transform their lives, but for children living below the poverty line it is their main hope of escaping a lifetime of deprivation. The Government recognise that; one of the levelling-up missions is for 90% of primary school age children to achieve the expected standard in key stage 2 reading, writing and maths by 2030. However, the Government stand by while children are deprived of that one shot at education because they do not get a decent night's sleep. Even before the pandemic, disadvantaged children were already 18 months behind their peers at school, and covid-19 has exacerbated that attainment gap. That distressing trend is continuing. The Sutton Trust recently reported that 74% of the teachers it surveyed saw an increase in pupils too tired and unable to concentrate in class. In what universe can the Government claim to be levelling up when increasing numbers of children are struggling at school because they do not have a bed?

The Government have said that they are acting on the issue, and I am sure that we will hear that from the Minister. In response to the petition, they stated that there are several avenues of support that are available to families affected by bed poverty. One of those is the budgeting advance, which is a loan available to universal credit and legacy benefit claimants—the only source of direct Government support for the cost of essential furniture. However, in evidence sessions, parents told me that the loans condemn them to further poverty; although the loans might allow them to buy a new mattress—at a cost of at least £100, I would say—they are left hopelessly trying to pay them back on already stretched and insufficient incomes. They are trapped in a cycle of deprivation and debt.

Kim Leadbeater: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to think outside the box when it comes to bed poverty? I am fortunate to have a fantastic range of bed manufacturers in my constituency of Batley and Spennings. I wonder whether the Government might consider working with them on a scheme to help families who are struggling. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a good suggestion?

Catherine McKinnell: The Government definitely need to think outside the box and take responsibility for this issue, and I will come to why. My hon. Friend points to what the charitable sector has been doing, working with local bed manufacturers that are solving the problem in very localised ways, but this is a national issue and it needs a national response. That is the point that the Government really need to listen to.

The anti-poverty charity Turn2us made a similar assessment, identifying the 2013 conversion of the social fund grant into a budgeting loan as the single biggest erosion of help for those living without household appliances. Among those unable to access the social security advances, there is an alarming trend of parents becoming victim to predatory high-interest loan organisations because they just cannot see any alternative to securing a peaceful night's sleep for their children. Rather than giving a helping hand to families facing unimaginable hardship, the means-tested and loan-based provision of support is pushing families into even more desperate circumstances.

In response to the petition, the Government have said that councils in England have been

“empowered to establish local welfare provision”,

which is another claim that seems detached from the reality. More than a decade of austerity has had catastrophic consequence for local authorities, and chronic underfunding has left them permanently uncertain about their future and unable to deliver the long-term, transformational policies that communities in crisis need. This year's autumn statement doubled down on the trend, forcing yet another real-terms cut to local authority budgets: needless to say, that has impeded the ability of councils to address bed poverty.

End Furniture Poverty has consistently challenged the alarming diminishment of local welfare assistance schemes across the country. In November, it found that more than one in five local authorities in England had closed their schemes, leaving over 14 million people without access to crisis support. Although the Government are likely to indicate that the deficit has been bridged by the household support fund, that does not offer hope to children sleeping without a bed. With tight spending deadlines and guidance provided at short notice, many local authorities have been unable to develop the infrastructure needed to ensure that they are meeting all areas of need.

Often the fund has been given as direct grants to people on certain benefits, or to third-party organisations such as food banks. Of course, I am not here to suggest that those are ineffective or unsuitable ways for local authorities to distribute the support fund—for a child, being well fed is just as important as being well rested. However, it is indicative of the insidious nature of child bed poverty, which, being largely absent from public awareness, has become impossible to address, despite the very best efforts of charities. I hope people realise that it is a problem, which is why Bex and the supporting petitioners are calling on the Government to create a national sleep strategy.

Given that storing, transporting and providing beds poses a number of financial and logistical challenges, the petitioners fear that the funding will inevitably continue to be redirected in order to prop up other frontline services. They therefore want the Government to explicitly commit

to end child bed poverty and ensure that councils have the resources and capacity to do it. A national sleep strategy also has the potential to address several other related issues. For Orange Box North East, it could mean developing the infrastructure needed to stop good-quality pre-loved furniture going to landfill, and to divert it instead to families in need of an affordable option. For The Sleep Charity, it could provide much-needed education to an increasingly sleep-deprived teenage population, which we know is a big issue. How can we help children to develop healthy behaviours around getting a good night's rest if they do not even have a bed to sleep in?

There are so many people with expert insight and the drive to create a brighter future for our children, but if they are left filling the void left by a Government who are failing to provide children with a safe space to sleep at night, it is an opportunity wasted. However, despite all the possibilities that a national sleep strategy holds, my discussions with charities have led me to one conclusion: until the Government finally step up and commit to end child poverty with a joined-up and cross-departmental approach, there will always be children growing up without a bed.

It is absurd that our country is facing such desperation that charities are being forced to compete over which symptom of child poverty the Government should pay most attention to. It is not enough to leave an overstretched and under-resourced third sector relieving the physical manifestations of child poverty, nor to repeat tired lines about the importance of getting parents into work when 70% of children living below the poverty line come from working households. Our children need a coherent, cross-departmental anti-child poverty strategy matched with ambition and investment. We need action on the social security system, on insecure, low-paid work, on housing, on education, on our early years sector and so much more. We need more than yet another pot of funding for crisis support. Enough of the sticking plasters, which simply patch over the trauma that is crippling our country.

Despite its seeming normalisation, child poverty is not inevitable. The last Labour Government proved that and turned the figures around. Whether they are going without a bed, food, a warm home or decent clothes, children will continue to be crushed by the pressures of poverty until we see such a commitment from the Government again.

I have a few questions for the Minister. Will he commit to ensuring there is a definition of child bed poverty within Government so that we understand and start to measure the extent of the problem? Will he set out what work the Government have undertaken with third sector organisations to understand the level of child bed poverty in the UK? Will the Government review regulations in the social housing sector to ensure that those without access to furniture have some protection when they move into a new property? Does he recognise the financial challenges that loan-based support poses for families who are in hardship or in crisis? Does he agree that the conversion from a grant was the biggest erosion of help for those living without household appliances, which is what it has been assessed as? Will he consider the petitioners' request for all local authorities to be provided with dedicated resources to fund local schemes and support families affected by the crisis of

[Catherine McKinnell]

bed poverty? Does he agree that child bed poverty is part of a much wider issue—the scandalous level of child poverty in the UK? Will the Government commit to a cross-departmental laser-focused strategy to eradicate it urgently?

I recently visited a school in my constituency and spoke about my preparations for this debate. I can still see the shock on the faces of the pupils when they heard that there are children just like them growing up without the safe space that so many take for granted—a bed. A bed of their own is the bare minimum that we should expect for every child in this country. I still cannot believe that we are even having this debate. Even those pupils knew that bed poverty is nothing short of a crisis, but it is part of a much wider systemic problem under successive Conservative Governments. We have seen child poverty increase in this country. More and more children are growing up in households without the very basics, whether it is food in their stomachs, heating in their home, clothing on their backs or, as this petition highlights, a bed.

It should be a source of immense shame that we have children sleeping in the bath or on the floor, or sharing beds. As a society, we are failing our children and taking away their futures. The cost of living crisis continues to hit households in the UK, which are facing double-digit inflation, so it is clear that the problem is only going to get worse. The Government can and must do much more. They are not a mere bystander to this issue; they are our only hope of tackling it. With a laser focus and a joined-up strategy, they can lift children out of poverty. Only then can we be sure that all children will have a safe space to lay their head at night. I really hope that the Minister hears this call and that the Government finally take action on this issue.

4.54 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) not only for her work on the Petitions Committee, providing time for this petition and making it a priority, but for starkly setting out the pervasive nature of this type of poverty and how it affects children. I join her in paying tribute to Bex Wilson, who started the petition.

The debate has shone a light on how prevalent and stark bed poverty is throughout the UK. According to the Department for Work and Pensions' households below average income survey from, 26% of children have parents who want to replace worn-out furniture but cannot do so and 19% of children surveyed have parents who want to have a bedroom for every child aged 10-plus of a different gender, but also cannot afford to do so.

I recently spoke to Calderdale Lighthouse, which is a volunteer-ran charity in my constituency. I pay tribute to Diane Barker and her co-founders Donna and Emma, who do incredible work supporting disadvantaged families. As the cost of living crisis continues to bite, the charity has received an ever-constant stream of requests in recent weeks for beddings and beds for vulnerable families, in addition to the other support it provides. In one instance, a health visitor for a family consisting of a single parent—a mother—and two young children found

that neither child had a bed, and they asked if Calderdale Lighthouse could provide some. In another case, Calderdale Lighthouse provided blankets, duvets and hot-water bottles to a family that had no gas or electricity and had taken to sleeping in one room in an attempt to preserve heat.

On average, Calderdale Lighthouse receives a request for beds, cots or toddler beds more than twice a week. It has seen instances where victims of domestic violence choose to go back to their abusive partners so that their children are not left cold and without beds. There has been a number of cases where families with young children with continence challenges have struggled to provide them with the beds and bedding necessary. Charities such as Calderdale Lighthouse provide an important lifeline for so many people. Many of us cannot imagine sleeping in a proper bed being a luxury, but for too many children, it is.

As well as creating unhealthy and dangerous living conditions, bed poverty has a devastatingly long-term impact. The disruption caused by not having a bed permeates through every aspect of a child's life and development. How can we possibly expect children to learn, grow and realise their true potential if they come to school exhausted and weighed down by a disrupted night's sleep? One of my constituents recently got in touch to powerfully explain this problem. They said,

"I currently reside in a one bedroom flat on 15th floor, which is not ideal. We are overcrowded, my son cannot develop to his full potential in this tiny flat. He also needs his own bedroom as he has trouble sleeping, meaning he's disrupting my daughter."

The link between child poverty and children's outcomes is clear. Data from 2014 showed that less than a third of Calderdale pupils in my area who claim free school meals achieve five or more GCSEs at grade C or above, including English and maths, compared with nearly 60% of all pupils. Unfortunately, bed poverty is symptomatic of a wider trend of growing poverty. Under this Government, the proportion of children in poverty in my constituency has steadily grown. According to the House of Commons Library, 30% of children in Halifax live in relative poverty—an increase of more than 6% since 2015. A further 25.8% of children in Halifax live in absolute poverty. I want every child to have the chance to fulfil their potential, but the cost of living crisis on top of years of austerity has taken us back to an almost Victorian era for some families.

Under this Government, work no longer represents a route out of poverty. According to the Library, 65% of families in relative poverty in Halifax are classified as in-work families. Bed poverty is not seen by many in our society and, like my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North, I frankly do not receive direct contact about it, because it is hidden. Most of the referrals to local charities like Calderdale Lighthouse come via social workers and health visitors, who are required to involve themselves in people's lives and to visit homes. If they were not there undertaking those roles, such deprivation would probably go completely unseen, and I pay tribute to them for being in those homes, for raising the alarm and for undertaking that work day after day, which I can only imagine has an impact on them as well.

The debate has shown that children up and down the country are suffering in this way, hidden from the line of sight, in people's homes. The reality is that many children will go to bed in insufficient conditions tonight. We can

clearly see the incredibly detrimental impact those conditions are having on children's broader outcomes. We all bring problems and injustices to Parliament—that is part of our job. However, I say in all honesty that this is one of the hardest speeches I have ever had to write, prepare for and give, so heart breaking is the reality of bed poverty.

5 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on her work on the Petitions Committee and on introducing the debate so effectively, passionately, knowledgably and sensitively. In common with others, I thank Zarach as well as Crisis and Barnardo's for their supportive work.

We may be few in number in the Chamber today, but I know we speak for many colleagues in expressing our distress over any child going without the space and comfort to sleep. As we have heard, children need sleep and a safe space to grow and learn. That is essential for neurological development, absorbing what is taught at school and building up a memory store for adulthood, a point put well by my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), where at least 163 children do not have a bed of their own. She highlighted the horrific impact that that has on their education and emotional wellbeing.

Sleep is as important to a healthy lifestyle as limiting fast food and running around the park, but too often we can forget that as we get older. Bed poverty is a hidden level of poverty, and not something that parents, families or children are willing to share; it is hidden away from sight. As any parent will know, children's sleep is crucial for our sanity too. Behaviour, along with physical and mental health, is drastically impacted by the amount and quality of sleep people get. Studies in China in 2021 found that the quality and length of sleep directly correlated with levels of depression and anxiety later in adolescence.

Salient points have been made by hon. Members throughout the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North talked about the scale of child poverty in this country, with 3.9 million children in poverty in 2022. That should shame any Government, of any colour, into action. Bed poverty has a horrific impact on a child's education and wellbeing that ensures that the cycle of poverty and deprivation continues. We need to break that cycle for good.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) pointed out the growing levels of child poverty—we are seeing not a decline, but growing levels of child poverty. In places such as Halifax, 30% of children are growing up below the poverty line. The cost of living crisis plus the pandemic and years of austerity have created a perfect storm that allows child poverty to continue. As we have heard, there has been a constant mantra—and almost a guilting of parents—that work is the best route out of poverty, but we know that millions of people go to work, do the right thing and work all the hours that they can yet are still paid below poverty wages. That is an absolute disgrace. My hon. Friend is right to thank the charities and social workers who are the backstop for families, but it should not be that way. I cannot believe that in 2022, in the sixth richest country in the world, we are talking about children going without beds.

I invite all Members, Mr Paisley, to picture a scene: a family Christmas, with sparse food on the table, if there is indeed even a table, mum and dad worried about paying the rent, grandparents shivering in the cold and dark, kids sharing single beds, sleeping on the sofa or even on the floor or in a bath tub. That sounds Dickensian, but is in fact the prospect for too many of our constituents as they face hard times this Christmas. In 2020, Crisis estimated that 30% of families on the lowest income could not afford a bed for their child. Will the Minister provide an updated assessment of the figure as it stands now, after a prolonged pandemic, energy price rises, rocketing inflation and a catastrophic recession?

The housing crisis is nothing new, but its impacts are reaching new heights. Last Christmas, 1,300 families with children were living in unsuitable B&B accommodation over Christmas, already a rise of 3% on the year before. Given the added recession, will the Minister tell me how many more families with children will be in temporary accommodation for Christmas 2022? Is his Department investigating how many of them are living in unsuitable, overcrowded conditions, perhaps also grappling with dangerous levels of mould, damp and cold?

The gap between housing benefits and standard private rents is also increasing. New research by Crisis found that fewer than one in 12 homes advertised on Zoopla were affordable for renters receiving housing benefit, compared with one in eight just five months ago. With section 21 eviction notices still not banned three years after their election on a manifesto that promised to deliver that, the Government are only pushing more families into homelessness and more children into bed poverty. When will we see the ban on section 21 no-fault evictions? Do we have to wait for a Labour Government to finally get rid of them?

The topic of the debate leaves us all asking why, in a country as wealthy as ours, we are grappling with something as basic as children not having the space to sleep. As with food poverty and fuel poverty, bed poverty is just part of the wider scope of deprivation in our allegedly world-leading country. If a parent cannot afford to give their child space to sleep, it is unlikely they are managing to comfortably pay their bills, feed them well and provide for them as any parent would wish to do. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North said, this level of poverty leaves families teetering on the edge and still at the mercy and prey of legal loan sharks.

Children's charity Barnardo's set up an emergency fund in October to provide urgent support to children, young people and families dealing with the cost of living crisis. Although originally envisaged to help with food costs and energy bills, Barnardo's has already seen a concerning demand for beds and bedding. In my constituency of Luton, our Labour council released a 2040 report with a vision for where our town would be in two decades' time. The vision is not a shy one. We aim to eradicate poverty in our town by 2040 and build a child-friendly town. I am proud of that aim, as everybody within my local government should be. It is bold, ambitious and inspirational, and it is everything local government should be, but we have to contend with a Government in power imposing 12 years of austerity on this country. Local communities have to take matters into their own hands for the sake of their people, but they are fighting a constant battle of inflation, cuts and rising demand.

[Sarah Owen]

Local authorities have already lost 60p for every £1 of Government funding since 2010, but I know they will fight tooth and nail to support their residents in need, especially children. When will our Government finally take responsibility for the children they should be protecting and caring for? When will all children have a safe bed to sleep in? I look forward to hearing the Minister's solution to the problem, as it is one we all want to see solved. I hope that not too many families in the UK will face cruel, cramped Christmases this year. Christmas is supposed to be a time of hope. I genuinely hope that this Dickensian Conservative-induced nightmare, with child poverty at the levels we are seeing, finally comes to an end before another generation is harmed.

5.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): It is a pleasure to respond to the debate under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I am grateful to all hon. Members who have spoken. As the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) said, we are small in number, but I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the topic. I am also grateful to the hon. Members for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and for Batley and Spenningsdale (Kim Leadbeater) for their contributions, and I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for introducing the debate.

As hon. Members already have, I want particularly to thank Bex Wilson, founder of Zarach. The great work her and her colleagues have done in West Yorkshire has been referenced on multiple occasions. She highlights some of the challenges that she has seen on a local level within Leeds and I accept that there are challenges in other parts of the country as well. I pay tribute to her organisation and its brilliant work to provide beds for families who are struggling, especially for those with young children.

As the hon. Member for Luton North said, we all share the same end, which is not to have families or children who need support, do not have access to beds and do not have the ability to have a good night's sleep, which we all benefit from and often need to be able to make progress in the next day, week and month as we go forwards in our lives. It is down to all the people who work day in, day out to ensure that children can sleep safely and comfortably in their own home that we have, I hope, made progress over recent decades, whether as part of wider work to educate and support or to ensure welfare is in place.

We absolutely agree that sleep is important. The hon. Member for Luton North talked about a number of studies from China and research has also been carried out by the University of Maryland in the United States, which found that pre-teens who slept fewer than nine hours a day had noticeable differences in brain structure, mood and thinking compared with their peers who had sufficient sleep each night. Although science will always be developing in these areas, it is recognised that sleep is a hugely important part of ensuring that people are ready for the next day that they need to face.

We agree on the issue and that it exists—which it does, in certain places. We might take different views on how much it exists, and I accept the point that it is

sometimes difficult to understand the level of challenge, but the question is what we do next. We all want to ensure that there is support for those who are in need, and we want to find the best way to ensure that we can cover that need. We want to highlight the amazing work of volunteers from Zarach and wherever else such work is happening in the country. I acknowledge their understandable concerns about why, at times, the system does not work as perfectly or as well as we would ideally like it to.

No system with hundreds of billions of pounds in it will work perfectly. The job of Government is not to claim that the system is perfect but to recognise that there are challenges, and try to structure that system in a way that works while ensuring that we do not change the way in which people work, operate and are incentivised where they can resolve some of the issues themselves—I recognise that not everybody can.

All that brings questions: ultimately, what do we do when we see issues such as this; and secondarily, what is it proportionate for the Government to do, and how should they respond when they see such issues? The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North anticipated some of the points I am likely to make. A substantial amount of work is going on across Government to provide a system of support for vulnerable children and families, which I hope includes the ability to tackle sleep deprivation and the drivers behind it.

I will spend some time explaining how that work is broken down between the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, in which I serve, and why, given the plethora of initiatives across multiple Departments, we do not think that a national sleep strategy is the way to go at this time. A substantial amount of work is already under way that we hope is helping in this difficult and challenging area.

I will start with the top line, which is about tackling poverty; it is the question with which the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North ended her speech. We recognise that there are often multiple, complex reasons why families find themselves in poverty. The hon. Lady suggested that the Government are a mere bystander, which is difficult to evidence given what we are doing. This year, we will spend the best part of a quarter of a trillion pounds—£245 billion—through the welfare system to tackle such causes head on, recognise that there are vulnerable people out there and ensure that people have the support they need. That includes about £110 billion of support for people of working age, who are the most likely to have children.

Catherine McKinnell: I want to challenge the Minister on his statement. I did not say that the Government were a bystander; I said that they were not a bystander on this issue and they have the power to do something about it. The concern is that, for everything the Government may be doing, they are also the architect of the problem. That is my view and the view of many in this area. I appreciate all the initiatives the Minister is outlining, but they are clearly not solving the problem.

Lee Rowley: I am grateful for that clarification, and I apologise if I inadvertently suggested something that I did not intend to. I was merely trying to contextualise. The hon. Lady accepted that a substantial amount of

work is going on. That needs to be acknowledged and contextualised within the wider discussion. There is such a substantial amount of work going on—I will go into that in a moment—that the challenge is knowing how best to approach things. I will try to address a number of the suggestions outlined by the hon. Lady and her colleagues.

It is important to acknowledge that a substantial amount of money is going into the issue. This has been a relatively well-regarded debate and I do not seek to make it particularly political, but, given the multiple references to austerity, I have to highlight that some of the difficult decisions that we have had to take over the last 12 years have been as a direct result of pre-2010 spending. We need to acknowledge that our decisions have trade-offs and consequences, and we are still living with those consequences a decade or so later, despite the fact that in absolute terms we are spending substantially more money than we were a decade or so ago. [HON. MEMBERS: “Such nonsense!”]

We are going to spend over £245 billion through the welfare system this financial year, and £110 billion to support people of working age. That builds on wider efforts to lift more people out of poverty and to support those who have been highlighted in this debate. There were 1.2 million fewer people living in absolute poverty in 2020-21 than in 2009-10, including 200,000 fewer children, 500,000 fewer working-age adults and 400,000 fewer pensioners. That is not to take away from the challenges we face today, particularly the cost of living, but it is important to contextualise where we are.

In response to the global challenges we are facing, the Government have provided £37 billion of emergency support this year, and we are putting in place more help over the coming months. In the autumn statement, £26 billion of cost of living support was announced as a taxpayer subsidy for 2023-24, meaning that from next year households on eligible means-tested benefits will receive up to a further £900 in cost of living payments. From April next year, we are also uprating benefits for working-age households and disabled people, as well as the basic and new state pensions, by over 10%. Benefit cap rates will be increased by the same amount.

Just today, in the local government finance settlement we have announced a further £100 million of support for people who are deemed to be the most vulnerable, including a discretionary element that gives local authorities around the country where there are challenges—whether they are to do with access to beds or something else—additional funds to be able to close those gaps and ensure people have the things they need.

Crucially, there is also a dedicated household support fund, overseen by the Department for Work and Pensions, that councils in England can use to help families struggling with essential household costs, including the purchase of new beds and mattresses. A further £1 billion is going into that fund over the next financial year. Nearly £850 million will be distributed in England, and the remainder will be distributed in the devolved nations according to the Barnett formula. That will mean we have allocated £2.5 billion of taxpayer subsidies since October 2021.

Crucially, local authorities will have the freedom to allocate funds according to the needs in their communities. Given the acknowledgement by the Opposition that this issue is difficult to assess or even find, which was one of

the points made a moment ago, the best way that we can respond to challenges that are hidden or semi-hidden is to provide both funds, which we have done, and the freedom to allocate those funds in the most proportionate and reasonable way in communities, driven by representatives in communities themselves, including the kind of councils that the hon. Member for Luton North highlighted, which are setting an agenda and making important decisions for their local area.

Holly Lynch: Some of the referrals coming through to local charities in Halifax relate to families involved in providing kinship care, which is where family members—often at short notice—take over responsibility for caring for a very young child as a member of their family.

Will the Minister, as part of his cross-departmental work and the Government’s response to the MacAlister review, which looks at the responsibilities of kinship carers and the support they deserve, specifically look at the support required by kinship carers? Will he look at what else can be done to support families in such situations when financial support is not a part of the package because of a variety of barriers, so that the children in those circumstances do not go without beds?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting the hugely important matter of kinship carers, which I know all Members will have an interest in and experience of; I certainly have, having spoken to constituents at length about these issues. It is an immensely challenging area to know how to get right. Of course, ideally in the first instance there would not be a need for such care, but this is life and there always is such a need. Where there are challenges, we want to keep young children as close as possible to their families and friends, who they know and understand. That will inevitably mean people take over at short notice caring responsibilities that they may not have anticipated. There is a very difficult challenge about knowing how to balance that. I will certainly pass on the hon. Lady’s comments to my colleagues in the Department for Education, who are leading on the MacAlister review and the response to it, and ask them to consider specifically her point about kinship care in that work, where possible.

I return to the point about freedom. Twenty-three councils have already put on record that they are using their funds to provide beds, bedding and blankets to vulnerable residents. Havering, for example, has already partnered with local retailers to supply beds, white goods and other essential household items to struggling families. At the other end of the country in Blackburn, the council has been working hard on the provision of new high-quality beds for children under the age of seven. Additional discretionary support funds are available where necessary.

I will touch on the broader point about supporting families. The supporting families programme operates between the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which I am a Minister within, and the Department for Education. It seeks to help councils do exactly what I have just mentioned—co-ordinate help for families to overcome multiple and complex problems. Supporting families funding is allocated to authorities based on levels of deprivation and the number of families in the local population; put simply, more deprived areas receive more funding. The programme can help with some of the drivers of financial insecurity

[Lee Rowley]

and the knock-on effects, such as those we are talking about today. It can help to address mental health, drug or alcohol problems, or issues such as finding work and keeping children in school. There was a 40% cash uplift for this programme in the Budget, which should mean that 300,000 families are covered over the coming period.

There is a role for schools and the Department for Education, as this is not just about council officers working with individual families; schools play an important role in identifying pupils who may not be getting enough sleep at home. That is why we are here today and why Bex Wilson has set up the charity, after her experience while teaching in Leeds.

Through the publication of the special educational needs and disabilities and alternative provision Green Paper, the schools White Paper and our response to the MacAlister review, we are creating a system that seeks firmly to work in the interests of vulnerable children and young people. We know that vulnerable children are more absent from school than their peers. In autumn last year, a third of all pupils eligible for free school meals missed more than 10% of school sessions, and nearly one in 10 pupils eligible for free school meals missed more than 10% of possible school sessions for unauthorised other reasons, compared to only 3% of their peers.

The pupil premium will provide over £2.5 billion in 2022-23 to help schools improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, which can be used to support social, emotional and behavioural needs, and approaches to improve attendance. Every local authority in England must appoint a virtual school head, who have a statutory duty to promote the educational achievement of children in their care.

I am grateful to Bex Wilson, Zarach and all those who have raised this important issue, and to the hon. Members who have spoken today. Across the House there is an absolute commitment to, and understanding of, the challenges we have debated. I hope that everybody, even if they disagree with the proposal that I put forward on behalf of the Government, recognises that a substantial amount of work has been done in the area, and there is a substantial amount of funding and taxpayer support. We all want to achieve the same ends and recognise various challenges. We are grateful for the work done by those who have highlighted this issue. I hope we can continue to make progress in the coming years, while continuing to debate the best approach.

5.26 pm

Catherine McKinnell: I thank hon. Friends who have contributed to the debate, both from the Labour Front Bench and Back Benches. I would thank the Minister for his response, but I expected more. It is very concerning that the Government do not seem to recognise that there is an issue, nor commit to understanding the extent of that issue. All we have heard is a list of actions that they are apparently undertaking, but that are clearly not solving the problem.

One mother who spoke to me when I was taking evidence for this debate said that, as a child, she had fled with her mother from domestic violence. She remembers how traumatic that was, but when they moved she said she felt cushioned by a state that supported them into a

new home. She does not remember not having a bed when she was growing up. She remembers being looked after and supported in what was clearly a traumatic situation. She has faced that again herself—she has fled domestic violence with her children—and she was shocked at how little support there has been; there was nothing for them. They managed to secure a house, but it had no furniture in it. She said they have lived with one lightbulb, which they move from room to room, and no beds for the children.

It is the charity sector that has helped them, not the Government. That is the case up and down the country. Food, clothing, housing and furniture are being provided by the charitable sector, not by the state. People in the most desperate circumstances no longer have a safety net. As much as the Government and the Minister have set out the support they might be giving, it is clearly not working. It is clearly not reaching the right people.

I did not intend to say that at the end of this debate. I have been quite moved by the evidence I have heard, but I am left not angry, but I think a bit despondent, by the Minister's response. I hoped that the Government, of all things, would want to tackle children without beds—would want to know how many children do not have a bed and discuss how we can solve that. Obviously, whatever the Government are doing is not working, because the number is growing not reducing. But that is anecdotal; we do not actually know, because the Government have not found out or even asked the question.

I would like to see the Government go away and think harder about this issue. It is about not just those individual children but a lifetime cycle of sleep deprivation that results in adult mental health issues, because if someone has not slept well as a child they will have that for the rest of their life. It will affect their education, mental health, development and wellbeing. Surely we want to put a stop to that, and ensure the basics of having a bed and somewhere safe to sleep. I hope the Government go away and think again. I appreciate that it is not all down to the Minister. The fact that we were not quite sure who was going to respond to the debate is telling of the Government's lack of focus on child poverty as a whole.

The Department for Education has an interest in children. The Department of Health and Social Care should have an interest in children's health and wellbeing. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and local government, should have an interest in ensuring that support is delivered at a local level. The Department for Work and Pensions looks after those households that need extra support. None of them appears to be talking to each other to develop a holistic strategy to ensure that more children do not fall into poverty, that they have a bed to sleep in and that we finally turn this around. I really hope the Government listen. If they will not, I really hope this country votes in a different Government who will.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I thank Catherine McKinnell for that impassioned wind-up.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 604509, relating to child bed poverty.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 19 December 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Household Energy Bills: Support

The Minister for Energy and Climate (Graham Stuart):

Following is a statement on energy bill support schemes.

Help with household energy bills—widening the support

On 29 July, details were announced of the energy bills support scheme, which is now providing a £400 discount on electricity bills to households across Great Britain, delivered over six months. On the same date we announced that energy bill support scheme alternative funding would be developed to deliver the same level of support to households without a domestic electricity account.

The Government announced further support in September with the energy price guarantee, which is reducing energy bills for households across the United Kingdom. It currently brings a typical household energy bill in Great Britain for dual-fuel gas and electricity down to around £2,500 per year and, at an equivalent level of support, in Northern Ireland to around £1,950 per year.

Energy policy is devolved in Northern Ireland and it would normally be the responsibility of Northern Ireland Ministers to put in place support for households with energy costs. In the absence of a functioning Executive but in consultation with Northern Ireland Ministers, the UK Government committed in August to develop and deliver a scheme comparable to that being delivered in Great Britain.

I am now able to update the House on both the energy bill support scheme alternative funding process in Great Britain and a scheme for Northern Ireland to ensure payments reach all eligible households this winter.

Energy bill support scheme—alternative funding

The energy bill support scheme alternative funding is for households in Great Britain who are not eligible for the energy bills support scheme which started delivering in October, as they do not have a direct relationship with a domestic electricity supplier. This includes many of the most vulnerable in our society. Those set to benefit include residents of park homes, some care home residents, tenants in certain types of private and social rented homes, homes supplied by private wires, residents of caravans and houseboats on registered sites, farmers living in domestic farmhouses without a domestic electricity connection, and households off-grid.

It is important to note that most households who do not have a direct relationship with a domestic energy supplier benefit from a discount on their energy bills through the energy bill relief scheme, which is already providing support to intermediaries such as landlords and park home operators. The Energy Prices Act 2022, passed earlier in the year, ensures those benefits are passed on to consumers who do not pay their energy bills directly to an energy supplier.

In January we will publish details on eligibility and open a portal on gov.uk offering a short online application process for those eligible households to apply for energy bill support scheme alternative funding. A helpline will be available for those unable to apply online. Applications will be validated, and payments processed by the relevant local authority. The £400 Government credit will be paid this winter to all eligible households who apply.

Northern Ireland energy bill support scheme

For Northern Ireland we have developed and will deliver a separate and bespoke energy bills support scheme, working with the separate Northern Ireland electricity suppliers, and respecting the very different nature of the energy market in that part of the United Kingdom. This scheme will also deliver for households this winter, with payments starting in January.

The payment will be for £600, comprising £400 for the energy bills support scheme and £200 for the alternative fuel payment, which all Northern Ireland households will receive, given the high level of alternative fuel use. The single payment will reach customers through their supplier, either direct to the relevant electricity bill payer's bank account, or as a voucher which will need to be redeemed into a bank account or as cash.

We are making funds available to suppliers for this purpose by the end of this year, so suppliers will be able to start paying customers in January.

A further announcement will be made in respect of alternative funding support for those in Northern Ireland without a domestic electricity supply.

I have also written to Northern Ireland energy suppliers setting out expectations for them to suspend all debt recovery and enforcement activity until the end of January, as well as to provide payment holidays until the end of January when customers are struggling to pay their bills.

Alternative fuel payment scheme

I can also set out today our intended timings for the £200 alternative fuel payment scheme for households in Great Britain who use fuels such as heating oil, LPG or biomass to heat their homes. Payments will commence in February, with most payments being made that month through electricity suppliers. More details about how we will target the scheme will follow soon in the new year. Households that will not receive automatic payments will be able to apply to the same gov.uk portal used for the energy bill support scheme alternative fund from February.

The Treasury has approved these extensions to the energy bills support scheme.

I will continue to update Parliament.

[HCWS466]

CABINET OFFICE

Publication of Resilience Framework

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Oliver Dowden):

I wish to inform the House that I am publishing the UK Government resilience framework further to the commitment made in the integrated review for greater strategic planning in this vital area. With the increasing volatility and inter-connectedness of risks and hazards, a strong resilience system is more important than ever. In March 2021, the integrated review committed the Government to developing

a new resilience strategy to strengthen our approach to preparedness and civil protection. This new framework delivers on that commitment and takes a systemic approach to all national threats.

The UK Government's resilience framework articulates our ongoing plan to strengthen the systems and capabilities that underpin the UK's resilience to all civil contingencies risks, from extreme weather to supply chain challenges or public health emergencies. It is ensuring that as well as managing immediate crises, we maintain a greater collective focus on preparation and preventing crises from happening in the first place.

The framework is built around three core principles:

A shared understanding of the risks we face is essential: it must underpin everything that we do to prepare for and recover from crises;

Prevention rather than cure wherever possible: resilience-building spans the whole risk cycle so we must focus effort across the cycle, particularly before crises happen; and

Resilience is a 'whole of society' endeavour: so we must be more transparent and empower everyone to make a contribution.

Work is already underway across Government to deliver on these principles and act on lessons from recent crises, but the framework outlines our further ambition on priorities such as:

Becoming more transparent on the risks we face so that businesses, charities, individuals and all levels of Government can prepare.

Protecting the most vulnerable in our communities and helping responders to target support effectively before, during, and after emergencies.

Strengthening accountability on resilience within Government and externally, including through an annual statement to Parliament on civil contingency risk and resilience.

Ensuring that local resilience forums have the resources, capacity, information, and capability needed to plan for and respond to the risks that we face.

Incentivising and supporting businesses, including operators of Critical National Infrastructure, to strengthen their resilience to real world risks.

Implementation of the proposals in the framework has already started. We have already made changes at the centre of Government to strengthen our approach to long-term resilience and short-term crisis management, and to embed a culture of resilience in all Government Departments. We have refreshed the classified national security risk assessment and will update the public version, the national risk register, in the new year.

The Prime Minister has approved a new sub-committee of the National Security Council on resilience which I will chair. I look forward to establishing the committee in the new year, when the terms of reference and membership will be published in the usual way.

I have requested that a copy of the resilience framework be deposited in the Libraries of the Houses of Parliament.

[HCWS464]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): Today, I am pleased to lay before Parliament, "The Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report 2022." This year has thrown into sharper focus the importance of our armed forces as standard bearers for the values we hold dear as a nation. This includes the support the

armed forces have provided to Ukraine to defend its sovereign territory against Russian aggression, the role the armed forces played during the 10 days of national mourning and state funeral of Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and in this year's commemorations of the 40th anniversary of the Falklands conflict. More than ever, our armed forces community is central to our national life, and about who we are as a country.

The UK's promise to support our armed forces community and to ensure they are treated fairly is as important as ever. We owe them a vast debt of gratitude and have a duty to ensure that those who serve, or who have served in our armed forces, and their families, suffer no disadvantage in comparison to other citizens. In some cases, special consideration is appropriate, particularly for those such as the injured or the bereaved. This is what the covenant sets out to do. In the same vein, this Government have committed to making the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran, acknowledging veterans' service to this country and setting out our plans in the strategy for our veterans.

Never has the armed forces covenant and support to veterans been more vital, and we recognise that partners across the UK, at all levels of the public, private and charitable sectors, have been working hard to support those who serve or have served, and their families. I am proud to lay this report before Parliament as a demonstration of that work.

Highlights from this year's report include:

The Government have fulfilled its 2019 manifesto commitment to "further incorporate the armed forces covenant into law". A new armed forces covenant duty has been created, that places a new legal obligation on specific public bodies to have due regard to the covenant principles when delivering certain services, or deciding certain policies, in healthcare, education and housing, that could impact the armed forces community. Armed forces covenant signings are rapidly approaching 10,000, with 1,634 signing over the last 12 months alone.

The inclusion of veterans' health in the GP training curriculum and national GP licensing assessment in England and Scotland, and the launch of a veterans' health innovation fund.

The Office for Veterans' Affairs published the Veterans' Strategy Action Plan 2022-24, setting out over 60 commitments, with over £70 million of additional funding, from across Government to further improve the lives of our veteran community.

A servicewomen's health improvement team worked on an eight-month sprint to address issues related to servicewomen's health, resulting in ground-breaking new policies and guidance to support servicewomen throughout the armed forces.

There were record levels of investment in service family accommodation in financial year 2021-22, with £179 million invested overall.

The Ministry of Defence has published its new UK armed forces families strategy, which provides the framework for an ambitious 10-year programme. Delivery of initiatives under each workstream has begun.

This report is a collaborative effort with input from service providers and professionals from a diverse array of backgrounds. I would like to thank colleagues across central Government, the devolved Administrations and local authorities, and those at every level and from every sector who are continuing to drive forward the work of the covenant and the strategy for our veterans in support of our armed forces community. We are also grateful to the external members of the Covenant Reference Group who provided their independent observations.

[HCWS468]

TREASURY

Making Tax Digital: Income Tax Self-assessment

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins):

Across the globe, digitisation of tax is increasingly the norm. Modernisation of UK businesses and the tax system remains of crucial importance to the UK.

Making tax digital (MTD) for VAT is already demonstrating the benefits to businesses that digital ways of working can bring.

MTD for income tax self-assessment (ITSA) will follow, with businesses, self-employed individuals, and landlords keeping digital records and using MTD-compatible software to submit updates to HM Revenue and Customs.

The Government understand businesses and self-employed individuals are currently facing a challenging economic environment, and that the transition to MTD for ITSA represents a significant change for taxpayers, their agents, and for HMRC.

That means it is right to take the time needed to work together to maximise those benefits of MTD for small business by implementing gradually.

The Government are therefore announcing more time to prepare, so that all businesses, self-employed individuals, and landlords within scope of MTD for income tax, but particularly those with the smallest incomes, can adapt to the new ways of working.

The mandation of MTD for ITSA will now be introduced from April 2026, with businesses, self-employed individuals, and landlords with income over £50,000 mandated to join first.

Those with income over £30,000 will be mandated from April 2027.

The Government will now review the needs of smaller businesses, and particularly those under the £30,000 threshold. This will look in detail at whether and how the MTD for ITSA service can be shaped to meet the needs of smaller businesses and the best way for them to fulfil their income tax obligations. Once that review is complete—and in consultation with businesses, taxpayers, agents, and others—the Government will lay out the plans for any further mandation of MTD for ITSA.

Following the phased approach, the Government will not extend MTD for ITSA to general partnerships in 2025. It remains committed to introducing MTD for ITSA to partnerships at a later date.

The new penalty system, harmonising late submission and late payment penalties for income tax self-assessment with those for VAT, will come into effect for taxpayers when they become mandated to join MTD. This makes penalties fairer and simpler for taxpayers. The Government will introduce the new penalty system for income tax self-assessment taxpayers outside the scope of MTD after its introduction for MTD taxpayers.

The Government anticipate that most taxpayers within the scope of MTD for ITSA will be able to sign-up voluntarily before they are mandated to do so. HMRC will keep this under review to ensure that all taxpayers using the MTD for ITSA service receive a high-quality service.

[HCWS465]

OBR Forecast: Spring Budget

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): Today I can inform the House that I have asked the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) to prepare a forecast for 15 March 2023 to accompany a spring Budget.

This forecast, in addition to the forecast that took place in November 2022, will fulfil the obligation for the OBR to produce at least two forecasts in a financial year, as is required by legislation.

[HCWS458]

EDUCATION

School Rebuilding and Funding Allocations for Schools, High Needs and Early Years

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Nick Gibb): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School System and Student Finance (Baroness Barran) has made the following statement.

The Department for Education has announced the next 239 schools to be provisionally selected for the school rebuilding programme and has also confirmed schools, high needs and early years revenue funding allocations for 2023-24 across England.

The school rebuilding programme was launched in June 2020 and will rebuild or significantly refurbish buildings at 500 schools and sixth form colleges over the next decade. Including the 161 projects previously announced, this announcement means that 400 schools have now been selected for the programme. Projects will enter delivery at a rate of approximately 50 per year, and will transform the educational environment for hundreds of thousands of children in the poorest condition schools.

To ensure we are delivering the greatest improvement to the school estate, each school in the programme has been selected from nominations based on the condition and safety of its buildings. Selected schools include primary, secondary and special schools and sixth form colleges.

Construction of new buildings at some of the previously announced schools is already underway, with a number of projects almost completed. These projects are supporting jobs and skills in local communities and driving productivity and innovation in the construction sector. New buildings will be net zero carbon in operation, incorporating modern designs and technologies, contributing to our sustainability commitments.

In addition to the school rebuilding programme, we are continuing to invest in the school estate with annual capital funding. We have allocated over £13 billion since 2015 to maintain and improve school facilities across England, including £1.8 billion in financial year 2022-23. We have also allocated an additional £500 million in capital funding to schools and colleges this financial year for energy efficiency upgrades, helping to reduce energy use during the winter months and beyond.

Details of the schools selected for the programme and more information about the methodology used have been published on www.gov.uk.

On funding, we are allocating the additional net £2 billion for schools announced at the autumn statement.

Overall, core schools funding is increasing by £3.5 billion in 2023-24 compared to 2022-23. School funding will be at its highest ever level in real terms per pupil by 2024-25, totalling £58.8 billion.

This includes an increase in mainstream school funding, for the 5-16 age group, of over £2.5 billion in 2023-24, compared to 2022-23. High needs funding is increasing by almost £1 billion in total.

As part of this increase, mainstream schools will receive a new, mainstream schools additional grant (MSAG) for primary and secondary provision in the 2023-24 financial year. This equates to a 3.4% increase in per pupil funding for mainstream schools, on top of the allocations through the dedicated schools grant, which we are also publishing.

The detailed methodology for allocating this new grant is published at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mainstream-schools-additional-grant-2023-to-2024>

The dedicated schools grant allocations are available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dedicated-schools-grant-dsg-2023-to-2024>

Maintained special and alternative provision schools and academies will also receive supplementary autumn statement funding, delivered by placing a new condition of grant on local authorities' use of their high needs allocations.

Pupil premium per pupil rates in 2023-24 will increase by 5%. This will increase pupil premium funding to £2,865 million in 2023-24, an increase of £180 million from 2022-23. This increase will ensure that this targeted funding continues to support the most disadvantaged children in our schools.

Finally, for early years, we have published the Government response to the early years funding formulae consultation launched on 4 July 2022, confirmed the hourly funding rates for the free early education entitlements in 2023-24 for each local authority, and announced their indicative allocations.

Reflecting the recently announced national living wage increases, we are investing an additional £20 million into the early years entitlements. This is on top of the £180 million for 2023-24 announced at the spending review. Taken together, this will mean at national level, early years providers are supported with the additional national living wage costs associated with delivering the free childcare entitlements next year.

We have updated the data underpinning the early years funding formulae, and have confirmed the approach to protections set out in the consultation to ensure the transition to new funding levels implied is manageable. The minimum funding floor for the three and four-year-old funding rate will therefore increase from £4.61 per hour in 2022-23 to £4.87 per hour in 2023-24. All local authorities will see at least a 1% increase in their funding rates in 2023-24, and up to a maximum of 4.9% for the three and four-year-old rate and up to 10% for the two-year-old rate. We will also increase the early years pupil premium (EYPP) and disability access fund (DAF) rates, from 60p to 62p per hour for the EYPP, and from £800 to £828 per child per year for DAF.

For maintained nursery schools (MNS), we are confirming the additional £10 million announced on 4 July 2022, providing for a minimum hourly rate of £3.80 per hour for MNS supplementary funding for all local authorities in 2023-24, and a £10 cap on the hourly rate, with transitional arrangements for the most affected local authority. We intend to maintain the cap at that level in 2024-25.

[HCWS457]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Environment Act 2021: Final Environmental Targets

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I am repeating the statement made by my noble Friend the Minister for Biosecurity, Marine and Rural Affairs, Lord Benyon, on Friday 16 December.

Final Environmental Targets under the Environment Act 2021

This Government are committed to leaving the environment in a better state than we found it. Following our consultation earlier in the year, we are confirming an ambitious suite of targets to deliver on that commitment.

These targets will tackle some of the biggest pressures facing our environment. They will ensure progress on clean air, clean and plentiful water, less waste and more sustainable use of our resources, a step change in tree planting, a better marine environment, and a more diverse, resilient natural environment.

The 13 targets that will be laid through statutory instruments are as follows:

Biodiversity on land

To halt the decline in species abundance by 2030.

To ensure that species abundance in 2042 is greater than in 2022, and at least 10% greater than 2030.

Improve the red list index for England for species extinction risk by 2042, compared to 2022 levels.

To restore or create in excess of 500,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitat outside protected sites by 2042, compared to 2022 levels.

Biodiversity in the sea

70% of the designated features in the marine protected area network to be in favourable condition by 2042, with the remainder in recovering condition.

Water quality and availability

Abandoned metal mines target: halve the length of rivers polluted by harmful metals from abandoned mines by 2038, against a baseline of around 1,500 km.

Agriculture target: reduce nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment pollution from agriculture into the water environment by at least 40% by 2038, compared to a 2018 baseline.

Wastewater target: reduce phosphorus loadings from treated wastewater by 80% by 2038 against a 2020 baseline.

Water demand target: reduce the use of public water supply in England per head of population by 20% from the 2019-20 baseline reporting year figures, by 2037-38.

Woodland cover

Increase total tree and woodland cover from 14.5% of land area now to 16.5% by 2050.

Resource efficiency and waste reduction

Reduce residual waste—excluding major mineral wastes—kilograms per capita by 50% by 2042 from 2019 levels.

Air quality

An annual mean concentration target for PM2.5 levels in England to be 10 µg m⁻³ or below by 2040.

A population exposure reduction target for a reduction in PM2.5 population exposure of 35% compared to 2018 to be achieved by 2040.

The suite of targets that we consulted on was the result of significant scientific evidence collection and development over preceding years that included input from evidence partners and independent experts, supported by over 800 pages of published evidence. We have full confidence in the final suite of targets, which represents the robust analysis already undertaken.

These targets are stretching and will be challenging for us to meet, whether that is through Government, through business or indeed at home in our individual lives through choices we make. In turn this will support action to tackle climate change, restore our natural capital and protect our much-loved landscapes and green spaces.

We will set out more details about our plans to deliver them in our environmental improvement plan: our manifesto for the environment for the next five years. We will publish this by 31 January, as required by law.

The Government response to the consultation will be published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS456]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

British Council Annual Report and Accounts 2021-22

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. It supports peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide. It does this by uniquely combining the UK's deep expertise in arts and culture, education and the English language, its global presence and relationships in over 100 countries and its unparalleled access to young people and influencers around the world. In 2021-22 the British Council received £183 million grant-in-aid from the FCDO. With a total reach of 648 million people in 2021-22, the British Council creates mutually beneficial relationships between the people of all four nations of the UK and other countries. Such connections, based on an understanding of each other's strengths and shared values, build an enduring trust. This helps strengthen the UK's global reputation and influence, encouraging people from around the world to visit, study, trade and make alliances with the UK. Copies of the British Council's Annual Report and Accounts for the 2021-22 financial year have been placed in the Library. The annual report can also be found at the British Council's website: www.britishcouncil.org/about-us/how-we-work/corporate-reports.

[HCWS461]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Workforce

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Will Quince): The NHS workforce are the key component of the NHS. The NHS is one of the largest single employers in the country and globally. Around 5% of the England workforce are employed by the NHS, so the way in which we value the workforce matters, both in ensuring delivery of health services and as a role model for other employers.

The autumn statement has made up-to £14.1 billion available to Health and Social Care service over the next two years. This funding will help enable us to continue to support the NHS in England. I am therefore pleased to report that there are a record number of people working in the NHS. Latest data for September 2022 show almost 1.4 million full time equivalent staff working across NHS hospital trusts and primary care in England.

Within this workforce there are a record number of over 168,000 full time equivalent doctors across hospitals and general practice. This includes over 131,000 in NHS hospitals and over 37,000 in general practice. There is also a record number of over 333,000 nurses across the NHS, with over 316,000 working in NHS hospital and over 16,000 across primary care.

We have over 32,000 more nurses now than we had in September 2019, putting us well on the way to meeting the Government's commitment of 50,000 more nurses across hospital and general practice settings by March 2024. Over the last three years, this speed of growth in nursing numbers is faster than we have seen since 2009 when current recording began.

Internationally trained staff are an important component of the 50,000 nurse target. They have been an integral part of the NHS since its inception in 1948 and continue to play a vital role. We hugely value their contribution to providing excellent care. While we are working hard to increase our homegrown supply of health and social care staff, ethical international recruitment remains a key element of achieving our workforce commitments.

I am also pleased to see that other key NHS hospital workforce groups continue to grow, such as the now almost 18,000 professionally qualified ambulance staff, 12% more than in 2019 and over 81,000 allied health professionals, 20% more than 2019. These staff work hand in hand with the over 380,000 clinical support staff who are so vital to the effective delivery of patient care.

We are also growing new professions to support patient care and I am pleased to see over 2,500 physician associates and over 4,600 nursing associates working across hospitals and primary care.

We also have a very healthy pipeline of people training to work in the NHS. There are record numbers of medical students in undergraduate training and graduates from recent expansion in medical school places and schools are starting to enter foundation training. Large numbers of candidates also continue to choose courses in nursing and midwifery in England, and since September 2020 all eligible nursing, midwifery and allied health profession students have received a non-repayable training grant of a minimum of £5,000 per academic year.

For the third consecutive year we have seen over 26,000 acceptances to undergraduate nursing and midwifery programmes. There were 3,700 more acceptances in 2022 than in 2019—a 16% increase. This is alongside substantial expansion of nursing apprenticeships, with over 3,000 people starting in 2021-22 compared to less than 1,000 in 2019-20.

However, in spite of the growth we are seeing, we know health and care staff are facing ongoing challenges. The rising demand for services due to the pandemic, service recovery and an ageing population means that staff continue to work under pressure.

Therefore, alongside expanding the workforce we must therefore work to retain the staff that we have and ensure the NHS is an attractive place to work.

The NHS People Plan and the NHS retention programme are focused on improving the experience of staff working in the NHS, as well as seeking to address the reasons they leave. This means ensuring we support staff health and wellbeing, improve the leadership and workplace culture of NHS organisations, and increase opportunities to work flexibly.

To help with flexible working, we are making changes to NHS pension rules to help retain experienced doctors and nurses, and remove barriers for retired staff who want to return. We have therefore launched a consultation on detailed proposals to enable staff to work more flexibly up to and beyond retirement age, and protect them from unintentionally higher annual allowance pension tax charges driven by inflation.

Looking to the future, we must ensure that the future workforce is both large enough to meet the challenges it will face and has the right people with the right skills working in the right places to address future demand.

To that end, we have commissioned NHS England to develop a long-term workforce plan for the NHS workforce for the next 15 years. This will look at the mix and number of staff required across all parts of the country and will set out the actions and reforms that will be needed to reduce supply gaps and improve retention. We have committed to independently verifying this report, and publishing it next year.

[HCWS459]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Protect Duty Bill: Martyn's Law

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): Today I am pleased to announce the foundational policy elements that will form the basis of this Government's upcoming Protect Duty Bill, also known as Martyn's law. These proposals have been developed in response to feedback received to the Government's 2021 consultation on policy, where seven in 10 respondents supported the concept that businesses should protect the public, in partnership with key stakeholders. Government will continue to work closely with business stakeholders to ensure that guidance and support is bespoke, accessible and easy to understand, enabling Martyn's law to be implemented successfully in an effective and proportionate manner.

As the House will be aware, the chair of the Manchester Arena inquiry recommended the introduction of a duty in June 2021. This was further to the 2017 London Bridge prevention of future deaths report, which recommended the introduction of legislation setting out the duties of public authorities. Martyn's law has been championed by the Martyn's Law Campaign—led by Figen Murray, the mother of Martyn Hett, killed in the Manchester attack—and the Survivors Against Terror network, whom I would like to pay tribute to today. It is also supported by expert security partners such as the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure (CPNI) and the National Counter Terrorism Security Office (NaCTSO) within Counter Terrorism Policing.

Overview

The proposed Martyn's law will seek to improve the safety and security of our citizens so they can enjoy public premises without fear of terrorism by improving protective security and organisational preparedness at a wide range of locations across the UK. It is emphatically in the public interest for the Government and business to work together to ensure people are protected when visiting venues, retail areas, and other publicly accessible venues without introducing undue burden. Those responsible will be required to consider the threat from terrorism and implement appropriate, proportionate mitigation measures. The two primary objectives for Martyn's Law will be to:

clarify who is responsible for security activity at locations in scope, thereby increasing accountability;

and improve outcomes UK-wide so that security activity is delivered to a consistent level. An inspection and enforcement regime will seek to educate, advise, and ensure compliance with Martyn's law.

Proportionate requirements

In developing Martyn's law policy, I have been clear that proportionality and clarity are fundamental to successful delivery. Legislation will therefore establish a tiered model, introducing a requirements framework that is linked to the type of activity that takes place at eligible locations and the number of people—occupancy—that the location can safely accommodate at any time. Wherever possible and appropriate the policy has been aligned to wider regimes designed to keep the public safe—e.g., health and safety and fire safety—to increase ease of understanding. The distinct requirements for each tier are:

Standard: will drive good preparedness outcomes. Locations with a maximum occupancy of greater than 100 people at any time will be required to undertake low-cost, simple yet effective activities to improve protective security and preparedness. This will be achieved by accessing free awareness raising materials and development of a basic preparedness plan considering how best a location can respond to a terrorist event in their locale.

Enhanced: focused on high-capacity locations in recognition of the potential consequences of a successful attack. Locations with an occupancy of 800+ at any time will additionally be required to take forward a risk assessment and subsequently develop and implement a security plan. Enhanced duty holders will be required to meet a reasonably practicable test. Locations with a maximum occupancy at any time of less than 100 will fall out of scope, however, they will be encouraged to adopt good security practices on a voluntary basis. This will be supported by free guidance and training materials. To ensure that Martyn's law is agile and responsive, Government will have the ability to adjust capacity thresholds in response to changes in the nature of the terrorist threat.

Definitions

Premises will fall within scope of Martyn's law where "qualifying activities" take place. This will include activities such as entertainment and leisure, retail, food and drink, museums and galleries, sports grounds, public areas of local and central Government buildings—e.g., town halls—visitor attractions, temporary events, places of worship, health, and education. It is proposed that Martyn's Law will apply to eligible locations which are either: a building—including collections of buildings used for the same purposes, e.g., a campus; or location/event—including a temporary event—that has a defined boundary, allowing capacity to be known. Eligible locations whose maximum occupancy meets the above specified

thresholds will be then drawn into the relevant tier. This would include, for example, music festivals, where there are known and controlled boundaries in place.

Responsible parties

To deliver clarity of responsibility and accountability, Martyn's law will define parties obliged to meet its requirements. This will be a simple formulation to establish persons in control of a premise. Where there are multiple parties at a location, Martyn's Law will primarily place obligations on a lead party while placing requirements on others to co-operate with that party, such as in the development of risk assessments and security plans. Martyn's law guidance will detail how and where it would be envisaged that parties will need to co-ordinate on assessments and plans and provide examples of good practice.

Exemptions

I intend that there will be some limited exclusions and exemptions from the duty. This includes locations where transport security regulations already apply; and those that are vacant over a reasonable period or are permanently closed. Those with a large floor space and low occupancy in practice—e.g. warehouses and storage facilities—as well as offices and private residential locations, will not be in scope.

As a unique cohort, places of worship (PoW) will receive bespoke treatment under Martyn's law. All PoW will be placed into the standard tier, with a small cohort of locations that charge for entry placed into the enhanced tier. Similarly, given the existing safety and safeguarding policies in place at under-18 educational settings, such sites will be placed into the standard tier regardless of their occupancy. However, due to the accessible nature of higher educational settings I consider there is no case for any special treatment. I also consider that given their iconic status, with many locations operating as high-footfall visitor attractions, there is no case to provide any exemption for publicly accessible Defence, royal and Crown estate sites.

Regulation

To limit burdens on the Criminal justice system, avoiding unnecessary criminalisation of individuals, enforcement will predominantly be delivered via a civil sanctions regime—to a civil standard. In all but the most serious cases a civil monetary penalty is likely to be issued to provide a backstop to the civil sanctions. However, in the case of the most egregious breaches a limited number of criminal offences will be available. It is not my intention for a failure to comply with standard Martyn's law requirements to result in criminal prosecution. In line with recent, comparable regimes, to disincentivise financial benefit from non-compliance, variable monetary penalties will be available. A maximum penalty of up to £18 million or 5% of worldwide turnover will be available for enhanced sites. Standard locations will be subject to a maximum £10,000 penalty. Civil liability for failure to comply with the requirements will be precluded by way of express provision for all duty holders.

Sensitive Information in Licensing Applications (SILA)

I intend to introduce the Sensitive information in licensing applications (SILA) protocol—by way of an amendment to the Licensing Act 2003—to align to the similar system already in place within planning legislation, sensitive information in planning applications, to reduce the risk of misuse of sensitive information in the public domain.

Bill preparation and Government support

I am pleased to have set out the above elements of Martyn's law, on the basis of which Government will introduce measures to the House as soon as parliamentary time allows. Statutory guidance to support duty holders in fulfilling Martyn's law requirements will also be developed. This will encourage a culture of continuous improvement. In addition, a range of initiatives are already in train to support understanding of Martyn's law and its requirements. ProtectUK will be a key tool for the effective delivery of support to all owners and operators of publicly access, providing guidance and advice, training options and, engagement opportunities through webinars and forums.

An impact assessment has been developed to robustly assess the expected impact on organisations in scope.

[HCWS462]

Licensing Hours: Consultation on Extension for Coronation

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

On 6 May 2023, the Coronation of King Charles III will take place. To celebrate this historic occasion, events will likely be taking place throughout the weekend, both in the UK and across the Commonwealth.

The Government have already announced an additional Bank Holiday on 8 May and celebrations will include public events and local community activities.

I am pleased to launch a consultation on extending licensing hours throughout the Bank Holiday weekend to allow those who wish to make the most of this opportunity. The consultation proposes that an extension would take place on 5, 6 and 7 of May to 1am the following day on each day.

Opportunities to gather with our families, friends and local communities were severely impacted by the covid-19 pandemic. His Majesty the King's Coronation provides an opportunity to come together and celebrate this great nation and enjoy our renewed ability to spend time together in marking this historic occasion.

A copy of the consultation will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and also made available on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS460]

Serious Violence Duty: Statutory Guidance

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

On Friday 16 December 2022, my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Home Office (Lord Sharpe of Epsom) made the following written statement:

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act received Royal Assent on 28 April 2022 and it includes provisions for the Serious Violence Duty.

The duty requires, specified authorities, namely police, fire and rescue services, health, local authorities, youth offending teams and probation services to work collaboratively, share data and information and put in place a strategy to prevent and reduce serious violence. Educational authorities and prisons/youth custodial institutions are also under a separate duty to co-operate with specified authorities. As announced in the then Crime and Policing Minister's statement of 9 June 2002, the Government held a formal public consultation

on a draft statutory guidance. This guidance is issued by the Secretary of State under chapter 1 of part 2 of the PCSC 2022 and supports the specified authorities across England and Wales in exercising their functions under the duty prior to its commencement on 31 January 2023.

Via the consultation, we sought views on the contents of the guidance including policy intentions for the secondary legislation, which were laid on 12 December, and we also requested separate feedback on what support partners might find beneficial to enable them to implement the duty effectively. This insight has helped finalise our plans for a local support offer. Further case studies were also requested which will form part of this package of local support. We would like to thank all those who contributed to the consultation, including those who officials engaged with directly through a series of sessions. The views received covered a range of issues but there was clear consensus on key areas that needed clarifying. This included clearer local accountability and responsibilities for local partnerships and Police and Crime Commissioners and additional clarity on the inclusion of domestic abuse and sexual offences under the duty. These are set out in the Government's consultation response along with our plans for commencement of the duty and addressed in the revised statutory guidance which are both published today.

A copy of the consultation response and the statutory guidance will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and also made available on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS463]

Work of the Home Office

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): Today I am updating Parliament on Home Office delivery since the previous written ministerial statement of 5 September 2022. In the face of an increasingly complex operational context, the Home Office continues to make a significant positive impact. We have faced substantial external pressures that have continued over the last three months, including the ongoing arrival of small boats and war in Ukraine. The Department remains committed to delivering better outcomes for the public and continues to work to deliver a safer, fairer and more prosperous United Kingdom.

Following the sad death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, the Home Office successfully delivered departmental responsibilities and assurance of police and security plans for Operation London Bridge from 8 to 19 September. Keeping the capital safe during an event on this scale—the equivalent of 160 state visits within three days—was a major achievement. This was the largest no-notice policing operation of a generation, which included over 12,000 police officers deployed on the day of the state funeral.

Reducing Crime

The first job of any Government is to keep its people safe, which is why we have put more police on our streets, are cutting crime and are protecting the public. Over the last three months, the Home Office has worked hard to achieve these priorities. Overall crime has fallen by 10% since December 2019, equivalent to 1 million fewer crimes.

Neighbourhood Crime

Neighbourhood crime is down by 20% since December 2019, and burglary has fallen by 30% over the same period. Since the Safer Streets fund was established, we have awarded £120 million to local projects in high-crime

areas across England and Wales through four rounds of funding, supporting over 250 projects. I am pleased that the National Police Chiefs' Council has announced that all police chiefs in England and Wales committed in September to attend all home burglaries. An example of this in action is Operation Tenacity, which saw the Metropolitan police attend most burglaries, resulting in 1,700 arrests in just six weeks during October and November this year.

Serious Violence

Hospital admissions for assault with a sharp object among under-25s—our primary metric for measuring serious violence—have fallen by 22% since December 2019. Our violence reduction unit programme, alongside targeted police enforcement activity, has prevented over 49,000 violent offences since funding for the programmes began in March 2019. In addition, 260,000 vulnerable young people have been supported through violence reduction units in their second year alone, and 90,000 weapons have been taken off our streets since 2019.

The Grip police enforcement programme is supporting the police to take targeted action in parts of England and Wales most affected by serious violence. Grip is helping to drive down violence by using a highly data-driven process to identify violence hotspots—often to individual street level—to target operational activity in those areas.

We are seeing the impact in areas we are funding. For instance, hospital admissions for assault with a sharp object among under-25s in the Metropolitan Police Force area fell from 465 in 2020-21 to 410 in 2021-22.

Drugs

We know that the drugs trade is at the heart of much of the homicide, serious violence and neighbourhood crime that blight our communities. Our 10-year cross-Government drug strategy, published in December 2021, includes £300 million of dedicated investment over the next three years, to drive work on tackling drug supply. We are breaking drug supply chains—our work to tackle the supply of drugs through county lines is already making an impact. Since the county lines programme was launched in 2019, the police have closed down more than 2,900 deal lines, including over 500 lines since April 2022, and made over 8,000 arrests. Dedicated specialist services are supporting children and young people and their families to escape county lines exploitation and rebuild their lives.

Drug data from Project ADDER—addiction, disruption, diversion, enforcement and recovery—a programme trailblazing a whole-system response to combatting drug misuse, shows positive early signs. Between January 2021 and September 2022, the ADDER programme has supported over 1,600 organised crime group disruptions, over 20,500 arrests, and over £7 million cash seized. We are also diverting people into treatment and wider support. For example, 12,400 out-of-court disposals have been offered and over 8,000 naloxone kits distributed in the community.

Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls

Between January 2021 and August 2022, a team of academics conducted sequential deep dives on the police response to rape in five police forces: Avon and Somerset Police, the Metropolitan Police Service, Durham Constabulary, West Midlands Police and South Wales Police. A wide range of data and information was gathered and examined during the deep dives, including

reviews of case files, observations of investigations and training, and focus groups with support services and victims. Following the deep dives, the forces have developed tailored improvement plans to address the findings, which has led to the roll out of Operation Soteria.

We continue to implement the rape review action plan, investing £6.65 million in Operation Soteria to deliver the national operating model for the investigation of rape for all forces to adopt from June 2023; introducing new powers to stop unnecessary and intrusive requests for victims' phones; and continuing to work with police forces to ensure they have the capability to return victims' devices within 24 hours. In the year ending June 2022, the police recorded 196,889 sexual offences, the highest level recorded within a 12-month period. This is a 21% increase compared to the year ending March 2020.

On 15 December, the Government published our third six-monthly rape review progress update, which showed that, although there is still more to do, the Government are on track to meet our rape review ambition to more than double the number of adult rape cases reaching court by the end of this Parliament. In the most recent data for 2022, the number of cases referred by the police to the Crown Prosecution Service was up by 95%; the volume of cases charged was up by two thirds; and the number of cases reaching the Crown court was up by 91% compared with 2019 averages.

We have continued to implement the strategy on tackling violence against women and girls—VAWG—the tackling domestic abuse plan, and have enshrined in law the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. We have introduced new offences relating to non-fatal strangulation, hymenoplasty and virginity testing. We have strengthened protections and support for victims of domestic abuse and the response to perpetrators through the provisions in the Domestic Abuse Act. We have made the regime for managing sex offenders and those that pose a risk of sexual harm more robust through provisions in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022.

In January 2020 we introduced stalking protection orders, to protect victims of stalking at the earliest possible opportunity—456 orders were issued in their first year. Extensive work is also under way to launch the pilot for the new domestic abuse protection notices and domestic abuse protection orders early next year.

On 25th October we launched the second phase of our national multimedia “Enough” campaign, which promotes safe ways for bystanders to intervene if they witness VAWG. The campaign has reached millions of individuals across England and Wales, with thousands of clicks through to organisations offering support for victims of VAWG.

Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation

We received the final report of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse after seven years of investigation into institutional failings to properly safeguard children from this most horrific abuse. I commend the bravery of the thousands of victims and survivors for sharing their testimonies and perspectives with the inquiry. We will continue doing everything we can to combat this crime, pursue these vile offenders, bring them to justice, and ensure that support is in place for all victims and survivors to help them rebuild their lives.

Public Order

The Public Order Bill will further enhance the police's ability to deal with disruptive protests that prevent ordinary people going about their daily lives and divert police resources from communities where they are needed most to prevent serious violence and neighbourhood crime. So far, disruptive protests in London alone have taken up over 12,500 police officer shifts. The Metropolitan Police Service has made over 750 arrests since the beginning of October.

Fraud

My Department is launching a new fraud strategy, including stepping up our response to pursuing and disrupting fraudsters, working with industry to stop frauds and to empower and support victims.

This Government are delivering the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, which will deliver the largest reform to Companies House in recent history. It will give law enforcement and industry the tools to bear down on the use of UK companies as vehicles for economic crime, including fraud. It will also better protect personal information and addresses provided to Companies House.

We have seen the success of the National Crime Agency's Operation AGADE, where we have recovered £54 million of criminal proceeds using a civil recovery order—the first of its kind.

We have seen Operation Elaborate, the largest anti-fraud operation in the UK to date, dismantling a website that was responsible for 3.5 million fraudulent calls in 2022—involving many agencies and forces, and led by the Metropolitan police, there have been over 100 arrests made across the country so far.

Policing

Police Uplift

The police uplift programme continues to support forces with additional police officers, and we remain on track to recruit 20,000 additional officers by March 2023. Data published on 30 September 2022 shows that 15,343 additional officers have already been recruited, accounting for 77% of our target. There are now 11 forces with the highest number of officers they have ever had: Cheshire, Dyfed-Powys, Essex, Kent, City of London, the Metropolitan, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, South Wales, Suffolk, and Thames Valley.

The police workforce is more representative than ever before. For the first time ever, there are over 50,000 female officers—50,364, as at 30 September 2022, which is 34.9% of all officers in post. There were 11,477 ethnic minority officers, as at 30 September 2022, which is 8.2% of all officers in post, the highest figures on record.

Police Performance

His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary, fire and rescue services continues to shine a light on force performance. Humberside received an excellent report from its latest inspection, with six “outstanding” grades. Humberside was awarded the “outstanding” grade for preventing crime, treatment of the public, protecting vulnerable people, managing offenders, developing a positive workplace and good use of resources. It received a further two “good” grades and one “adequate” grade.

Greater Manchester Police has made great strides in getting the basics right. Under strong leadership, it is responding faster to emergency calls and halved the number of open investigations since 2021. HMICFRS removed GMP from its “engage” phase in October 2022. I am pleased to see GMP working so constructively with HMICFRS and others to act on its inspection findings. I encourage others to learn from its experience.

Six police forces remain “engaged” by HMICFRS, and I expect all forces to make the necessary improvements and work towards restoring public trust and confidence in the police.

Police Culture

We recognise that police culture and standards need to improve to rebuild public trust and confidence. We are bringing forward part 2 of the Angiolini inquiry to focus on these issues and are reviewing the process of dismissals to ensure that policing can swiftly remove officers who fall well short of the standards expected of them.

We have commissioned the National Police Chiefs’ Council to conduct a review of operational productivity in policing, led by Sir Stephen House. This will address issues that may affect the anticipated outcomes from our investment in policing.

We believe that a policing career must be open to talented and committed people from across our communities, including those who do not have a degree or want one. That is why I have commissioned the College of Policing to develop options for a new non-degree entry route. The current transitional non-degree entry route will be kept open in the meantime.

Reducing the Risk to Homeland Security

The Home Office has continued to focus relentlessly on reducing risk across the full range of threats to our homeland security. In October, counter-terrorism police responded swiftly to an attack on a migration facility in Dover that was declared as terrorism.

On 30 October we announced a refresh of the UK’s counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST. This will ensure that we are able to best protect the public from the enduring threat of terrorism. The refresh will maintain clarity and consistency of purpose, and ensure that the necessary tools are in place to tackle terrorist hatred and violence.

Our counter-terrorism system never stops learning. Volume 2 of the Manchester Arena inquiry was published on 3 November 2022. This covered the emergency services’ response on the night of the attack. The Government will respond fully when all three volumes have been published. However, we are already enhancing our response using the learning from the attacks—for example, in improving joint working between the emergency services—which will feed the refresh of CONTEST. We have also received the independent review of Prevent, which we will look to publish next year alongside His Majesty’s Government’s response. We will reflect the lessons and learning from the Shawcross review, along with those from the numerous inquests, inquiries and other reviews from recent years through the CONTEST refresh.

I have today issued a further written ministerial statement providing an update on our progress on developing Martyn’s law—also known as the protect duty. This is a significant milestone in the development of this

legislation—the first of its kind—which will keep people safe by scaling up preparedness for, and protection from, terrorist attacks. This legislation will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows. This is a recommendation in Volume 1 of the Manchester Arena inquiry. This duty has been tirelessly campaigned for by Figen Murray, who tragically lost her son Martyn in the Manchester Arena attack. I would like to pay tribute to her, alongside all other victims, survivors and those affected by these heinous events.

Access to data is fundamental to the investigation and prosecution of serious crimes. The UK-US data access agreement entered into force on 5th October 2022. This world-first capability will fundamentally change the way we are able to fight serious crime across the UK, including terrorism, organised immigration crime and child abuse. The agreement permits certain UK public authorities to obtain data directly from US-based communications service providers. This will allow us to access vital data more quickly than ever before. Operational benefits are already being derived from the agreement.

Earlier in the year, in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Home Office delivered a transformative package of work through emergency legislation to strengthen financial sanctions legislation, creating new register of overseas entities and reforming unexplained wealth orders.

We are building on that work through the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, which was introduced in Parliament on 22 September 2022. This cracks down even further on kleptocrats, criminals and terrorists who abuse our open economy, and ensures that we drive out dirty money from the UK. It strengthens the UK’s reputation as a place where legitimate businesses can thrive and enhances our ability to tackle new and emerging threats such as the use of crypto-assets, ransomware and the growth of cyber-enabled fraud.

The National Crime Agency’s Combatting Kleptocracy Cell is also delivering significant success, with nearly 100 disruptions against Putin-linked elites and their enablers. It has frozen over £18 billion-worth of assets in the UK. On 1 December 2022 it conducted a major operation to arrest a wealthy Russian businessman on suspicion of offences including money laundering, conspiracy to defraud the Home Office and conspiracy to commit perjury.

The National Security Bill, which is now at its Committee stage in the House of Lords, represents a fundamental reform of our framework for tackling state threats. It includes a suite of new measures to tackle the full range of modern-day state threats, from sabotage and spying to foreign interference and economic espionage. It will ensure that our world-class law enforcement and intelligence agencies have the modern tools, powers and protections they need to counter those who seek to do the UK harm.

The first meeting of the new Defending Democracy taskforce took place on 28 November 2022. The taskforce’s primary focus will be to protect the democratic integrity of the UK from threats of foreign interference. The taskforce will work across Government and with Parliament, the UK intelligence community, the devolved Administrations, local authorities and the private sector on the full range of threats facing our democratic institutions.

Tackling illegal migration, removing those with no right to be here, and protecting the vulnerable

This year has been challenging for our efforts to tackle illegal migration due to pressures on the system, particularly due to consistently high numbers of arrivals by small boats and pressures on available accommodation, which have been exacerbated by responding to the war in Ukraine and continued instability in Afghanistan. I will continue to protect the public and keep our borders secure and the British people safe from harm.

The Prime Minister recently set out a range of significant new steps the Government are taking to tackle the challenge of illegal migration, including:

A new deal with Albania and changes to our approach to speed up the removal of Albanians with no right to be here. This includes assurances from Albania that it can offer the required protection, in line with our international obligations, to genuine victims of modern slavery; embedding Border Force officers in Tirana airport; increasing the threshold for people referred to the modern slavery system; establishing a unit to expedite Albanian claims, with 400 specialist staff and new country guidance for our caseworkers, making it clear that Albania is a safe country.

Establishing a new, permanent unified small boats operational command, with 700 additional dedicated staff to deliver a more co-ordinated response to tackling crossings; bringing together military, civilian and NCA expertise to co-ordinate our intelligence, interception, processing and enforcement.

Clearing the initial asylum decision backlog of legacy cases by the end of next year. We will make an initial decision in all cases that have been outstanding since before 28 June 2022.

Plans to bring forward legislation next year to prevent abuse of our legal framework, which will make it unambiguously clear that people entering illegally should have no right to stay here, and will be returned to their home country or a safe country for their asylum claim to be considered.

Due to the unprecedented number of small boat arrivals and the pressure from covid-19 on the asylum system, it has been necessary to use hotels to accommodate some asylum seekers. This is only ever a short-term solution and we are working with our accommodation providers to find appropriate dispersed accommodation across the UK.

The new UK-French agreement that I agreed with my counterpart lays the foundations for deeper co-operation to tackle illegal migration and marks the next step for the close operational partnership between the two countries, which has prevented over 31,500 crossings—nearly 50% more than to this point in 2021.

The arrangement means that, for the first time, specialist UK officers will also be embedded with their French counterparts, which will increase information sharing, improve understanding of the threat, and ensure that UK expertise is at the heart of efforts to disrupt crossings and clamp down on people smugglers. This more integrated approach will also include strengthened operational co-operation, including joint UK-France analysis teams, supporting the co-ordination and exchange of information by French command headquarters. We have signed the biggest small boats joint bilateral deal with France; we

have put the Calais group on a permanent footing, showing the importance of this issue to our European partners; and we have agreed new levels of intelligence co-operation with our European neighbours.

These measures build on the progress we have made through the year. We have introduced part 5 of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, which provides legislative clarity to victims and decision makers on victims' rights, including the entitlement to a recovery period and the circumstances in which it may be withheld.

We continue to return foreign national offenders by scheduled and charter flights. From January 2019 to March 2022, we have removed 11,532 FNOs. Since April 2020, we have chartered 156 flights to Europe and around the world. In the year ending June 2022, there were 3,250 enforced returns, of which 1,600 were to EU countries.

Safe and Legal Routes

We have continued to support those fleeing conflicts abroad, granting indefinite leave to remain to over 11,300 individuals from Afghanistan under ARAP or ACRS pathway 1.

As of 24 November, 202,710 visas have been granted and 146,222 have arrived in the UK from Ukraine; 59,480 have been granted and 41,093 people have arrived under the Ukraine Family Scheme; and 143,230 visas have been granted and 105,129 arrived under the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

Through the Hong Kong British National (Overseas) route, there have been a total of 150,600 applications since its introduction on 31 January 2021 up to the end of September 2022, of which there were 144,576 grants—96%.

Enabling the legitimate movement of people and goods

Passports are about to enter the busy period in January, and plans are well advanced in preparation for that and for a high level of demand forecast across 2023. There was record demand for passport applications this year, with approximately 7.4 million applications processed by the end of October. Service standards have remained high since November, and 99.9% of UK standard applications were completed within the 10-week service standard in the week ending 20 November. Every effort is being made to return to the three-week service standard.

The visa service has faced significant demands post pandemic and following Ukraine, and higher than forecast levels of demand. Considering this, it is performing well under pressure and, through supportive contingency measures, standard applications have returned to service standards and we are on track for complex applications to also return to service standards in December.

Despite these challenges, staff productivity has remained high, and we continue to manage staff flexibly across services to reduce work in progress to minimal levels for passport and deliver the visa recovery by the year end.

Border Force has seen passenger numbers increase to near pre-pandemic levels by the end of summer and also managed the introduction of post-EU exit goods checks and the first full year of EU citizens requiring passports and additional checks. The eGates have performed well and IT resilience has been strong, enabling over 90% of passengers to cross borders within tolerance levels.

Border Force also reached its annual target for cigarette and tobacco seizures within seven months of 2022-23. In October, £35 million-worth of cigarettes and tobacco were seized, bringing the year-to-date total to £255 million—101%—of the annual target of £252 million. On alcohol, Border Force seized £4.3 million, bringing the year-to-date total to £25.1 million—63%—of the annual target of £40 million.

The FBIS programme has built up the expertise and capability to reduce significantly the time taken to launch a brand-new visa route or to amend criteria for existing visa applications.

We have made significant progress in digitising the immigration system. We are increasingly replacing physical and paper-based products and services with accessible, easy-to-use online and digital services. This has provided applicants with an easy online application process, including providing biometrics and establishing or verifying identity using their smartphones. A fully digital application process has been delivered for the BN(O) route and some points-based system routes and now for Ukraine schemes.

All these achievements have been delivered against a challenging background and represent a significant effort across the Home Office in continuing to deliver on the people's priorities. The Home Office remains committed to keeping the public safe, protecting our borders, and countering hostile state threats.

[HCWS467]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Local Government Finance Settlement 2023-24

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove):

Introduction

On 12 December, I published a policy statement outlining proposals for the 2023-24 local government finance settlement and details of funding in 2024-25. Today, I have set out the provisional local government finance settlement for 2023-24 and launched our formal consultation on the proposals. This settlement provides a 9% increase in national level core spending power, making available almost £5 billion in additional resources, demonstrating how Government stand behind councils up and down the country.

Together, the policy statement published on 12 December, and this proposed settlement:

- Give multi-year certainty to local authorities, allowing them to plan ahead with more confidence over the rest of the spending review period.

- Ensure stability by introducing a one-off funding guarantee to ensure that every council sees at least a 3% increase in core spending power next year before any local decisions on council tax rates.

- Provide around £2 billion in additional grant for children's and adult social care in 2023-24.

- Maintain a balance on council tax, protecting residents from excessive increases while allowing councils to generate income to deliver local services.

Certainty

Local government has long called for greater certainty on funding following repeated one-year settlements. In the policy statement published on 12 December, the

Government have provided this certainty by setting out clearly our intentions and proposals for the 2024-25 settlement.

Stability

Government recognise that all local authorities are facing pressures. In this proposed settlement we are taking action to provide stability for all local authorities, across all tiers of local government, to support the vital work they undertake for communities across the country.

We are introducing a new, one-off funding guarantee that ensures every local authority will see a minimum 3% increase in their core spending power, before taking any local decisions to increase council tax rates.

Social Care

Adult and children's social care services provide crucial support to care users and young people in need, and this proposed settlement provides significant additional funding for this key area of concern. Government have listened, and we know that many local authorities are already facing difficult decisions brought on by inflationary and demand pressures. This is why we are providing around £2 billion in additional grant for social care, compared to 2022-23. Additionally, for social care authorities, we are consulting on a 2% precept for 2023-24. The council tax referendum provisions are not a cap, nor do they force councils to set taxes at the threshold level. When taking decisions on council tax levels, local authorities should recognise the pressures many households are facing.

We have also listened to councils' concerns about implementing adult social care charging reform in light of these pressures. That is why Government have made the difficult decision to delay these reforms, and to prioritise core pressures rather than risk destabilising the market. The funding intended for implementation will be retained in local authority budgets.

Council Tax

The Government's manifesto commits to continuing to protect local taxpayers from excessive council tax increases. This is an additional local democratic check and balance to avoid a repeat of what was seen under the last Labour Government when council tax more than doubled. The Government intend to proceed with a core referendum principle of 3% for 2023-24. Furthermore, we are proposing a bespoke council tax referendum principle of up to 3% or £5, whichever is higher, for shire districts. On top of this, we intend to proceed with a £5 referendum principle on band D bills for all fire and rescue authorities and a £15 referendum principle on band D bills for police and crime commissioners.

This proposed package of referendum principles strikes a fair balance. The council tax referendum provisions are not a cap, nor do they force councils to set taxes at the threshold level.

The Mayor of London has requested flexibility to levy an additional £20 on band D bills to the Greater London Authority (GLA) precept to provide extra funding for Transport for London (TfL). The Government have expressed ongoing concern about the management of TfL by this Mayor, and it is disappointing that London taxpayers are having to foot the bill for the GLA's poor governance and decision making. While the Government will not oppose this request, any decision to increase the

precept is solely one for the Mayor, who should take into account the pressures that Londoners are currently facing on living costs and his decision to raise his share of council tax by 8.8% last year.

We are also today announcing £100 million of additional funding for local authorities to support the most vulnerable households in England. This funding will allow councils to deliver additional support to the 3.8 million households already receiving council tax support, whilst also providing councils with the resources and flexibility to determine the local approaches to support other vulnerable households in their area.

Conclusion

These proposals will provide councils with the support they need. They give certainty, ensure stability, provide significant additional resources for social care, and maintain balance on council tax.

I welcome representations from all interested parties on the consultation we have launched today. The consultation will run until 16 January. The Local Government Minister will also be holding engagement sessions for Members of Parliament in the week commencing 9 January 2023.

[HCWS469]

Petition

Monday 19 December 2022

OBSERVATIONS

WORK AND PENSIONS

Method of uprating social security payments

The petition of residents of the constituency of Glasgow East,

Declares that any efforts to depart from the practice of uprating social security payments based on inflation rather than earnings would be a gross betrayal of the promises previously made by Ministers

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to maintain the practice of uprating social security payments in line with inflation

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by David Linden, Official Report, 17 October 2022; Vol. 720, c. 496.]*

[P002775]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride):

The Social Security Administration Act 1992 places a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to review the rates of state pension and benefits each year, following a review of trends in prices and earnings over the previous year.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has completed his annual uprating review and decided that state pension and benefit rates will increase in line with the consumer prices index (CPI) for the year to September 2022. This means that, subject to parliamentary approval, they will increase by 10.1% from 10 April 2023.

His decisions were announced by means of a written statement on 17 November 2022 and the proposed rates can be found on gov.uk:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/Benefit-and-pension-rates-2023-to-2024>

These uprating decisions will increase expenditure on state pensions and pensioner benefits by £13 billion in 2023-24 compared to no change in these rates for the same period. It will meet the Government's manifesto commitment to apply the triple lock to the new and basic state pensions. It will also extend CPI protection to those who rely on the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit at a cost of £700 million above the statutory minimum requirement. The decision will also increase expenditure on reserved non-pensioner benefits by £9 billion in 2023-24 compared to no change in these rates for the same period. This includes benefits for those with additional disability or care needs and increases to universal credit which provides essential support to people on the lowest incomes whilst they seek work, seek progression in work, or are unable to work.

Ministerial Correction

Monday 19 December 2022

EDUCATION

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Education topical questions on 28 November 2022.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Reports that this Government could cause monumental damage to higher education by restricting international students to so-called elite universities have been described by former Universities Minister Lord Johnson as a “mindless crackdown”. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this Government will not implement such a mindless policy?

Gillian Keegan: I can confirm that we have a world-class education system and we will attract the brightest students from around the world. That is good for our universities

and delivers growth at home. We were proud to meet our international student ambition earlier this year to attract 600,000 international students per year by 2030. Today that is worth £29.5 billion and we are now focused on bringing in £35 billion from our education exports, which are the best in the world.

[Official Report, 28 November 2022, Vol. 723, c. 652.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan).

The correct response should have been:

Gillian Keegan: I can confirm that we have a world-class education system and we will attract the brightest students from around the world. That is good for our universities and delivers growth at home. We were proud to meet our international student ambition earlier this year to attract 600,000 international students per year by 2030. Today that is worth **£25.9 billion** and we are now focused on bringing in £35 billion from our education exports, which are the best in the world.

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Monday 19 December 2022

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Monday 19 December 2022

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**not later than
Monday 26 December 2022**

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